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DISSENT AND CONSENSUS

DISSENT AND CONSENSUS : PROTEST IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

(India, Burma and Russia)

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

PROTEST AND CONSENSUS

BASUDEB CHATTOPADHYAY

HARI S. VASUDEVAN

RAJAT KANTA RAY

*'Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the Stage
And then is heard no more ; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.'*

Perhaps the most important historical fact about the study of protest in poor countries is that it has many faces. This is a truism, but like many truisms, is easily forgotten, largely because of the tendency on the part of the historians of this genre to focus exclusively on a restricted social arena. The trend, now-a-days, is to find infinite radical potential in the peasantry and in marginal social groups. Initially begun as attempts to redress perceived imbalances in historiography, there is much in this which is commendable. The doubts begin when one finds that other social groups, such as merchants and landlords, tend to fall by the wayside in the process. History from below, in order to be satisfying, should not be a restrictive intellectual exercise.

In fact many of the protests, which are conventionally associated with one or other social group, are found, on closer analysis, not to be confined to any one exclusive group. In other words, in the same protest one can find evidence of multi-class participation in varying degrees. In the present context what is interesting to note is that in several situations analysed in this work, protest movements were created by an underlying process of federating different interests and varying perceptions. The links between groups which are widely separated are often elusive for the purposes of analysis. But unless we assume or posit the existence of these links, we cannot explain how social groups with widely different perceptions and interests coalesced in a movement. Coercion or deception by leaders or short term tactical alliance based on accidental

mutuality of interest do not satisfactorily explain the persistence of such united protests. In Arun Bandyopadhyay's paper the supposedly elitist protest of the *mirasidars* actually turns out to be an amalgam of different levels of protest, not all of which can be adequately explained by the relative deprivation of privileged tenure holders alone. Parimal Ghosh has shown how the recurrent waves of peasant resistance to British imperialism successfully brought within its fold many different social groups ranging from the disaffected local officials and princes to the dacoit bands roving in the countryside. When an entire society is thrown into the cauldron and 'the people' is at war, it is futile to compute the strength of individual groups. The integrative impulses inherent in society have been shown by Bhaskar Chakravarti at work in the building-up of a multi-class nationalist united front in India against British rule.

All this is not to deny the perennial presence of divisive forces—class, caste or ethnic groups—threatening to fragment one component from the other. But society is also capable of transcending its own barriers and forging an overarching solidarity without necessarily surrendering the distinct loyalties of its constituents. It is able to function because of an accommodation of interests. Ordinarily differences are compromised and potential conflicts averted because the bonds of society are able in normal times to knit together all its levels into one complex but single fabric. Had this been otherwise, society would have broken down all the time and no ordered way of life would have been possible. Dissidences are numerous and admittedly of daily occurrence. A profound undertow of unfulfilled expectations frequently involve many people in many different forms of protest. That these do seldom produce an actual breakdown of the social order indicate a surprising degree of social cohesion as well. The fundamental continuity of life, despite the undeniable strains, is rendered possible because of the inherent strength and resilience of the society.

It is with such dissidences, which did not coalesce into revolutions, that this volume is primarily concerned. In none of the situations analysed here, not even in Suranjan Das' militant Calcutta, did the revolutionary moment appear. There was hardly any conjuncture which could turn individual happenings into a revolutionary outbreak. But then, revolutions do not happen every day and society continues to function. This is largely due to the fact that community is the bedrock of society. And a community is, in some psychological sense, a 'community', i.e., it shares certain common notions regarding

right and wrong. Thus, the trading community in eighteenth century Bengal that Basudeb Chattopadhyay analyses, felt itself wronged by the imposition of the Police Tax : all members of the trading community, big or small, banker or hawker, shared this sense of wrong. In short, communities are based on a collective sense of justice.

But it is also true that contending notions of justice clash all the time in a society. Such clashes, when they occur, are seldom straightforward confrontations between classes. People of many different classes are ranged on both sides, and they take their sides according to what they feel is just, not simply what they think is to their interest. After all, interest itself is no hard objective reality, but is constantly shaped by subjective notions of one's own self. This in turn involves a certain emphasis on values. A few contributions in this volume illustrate the contending notions of justice at work in the society. Thus, while Rajat Ray's Bengali gentry, at the turn of the present century, was beginning to perceive, in the Congress, a shared platform to work in, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's Namasudra peasantry, at the other end, was drifting towards an entirely opposite direction. Evidently, this was no class conflict in straightforward terms. What bonded together the many different participating interests in each of these, was a collective sense of justice. Where they differed, however, was over political and moral responsibilities for their perceived injustices. Hence the pursuit to redress took each of these to a different track. Once this happens, the notion of justice can well be a divisive force in society. This can be explicated with reference to the targets the combatants chose to attack. Such targets varied from headmen of upper Burma assassinated by rebels on account of their close association with the British to Marwaris of Burrabazar robbed of their effects by poor Muslim rioters. Apparently, the social dissensions arising in these instances are due to the violation of the insurgents' sense of what is fair. What is pertinent here is the fact that the rebels' identification of the oppressor varied with their particular positions in society. A Marwari trader may have his notion of a right order of the universe as much as the frenzied slum dweller. But their characterisation of the just order would predictably vary, and at times may even clash.

While issues such as these are of more general character, some specific matters need to be underscored. There are certain differences between the societies analysed here : and the problems encountered in India and Burma and those observed

in Russia (an essay on which is included in this collection) will clearly vary in nature. Imperialism implied political, social and economic subjection to an alien order. And this made the problems of protest in the context of the British rule somewhat different from those which would occur in other societies. The state in Russia was firmly embedded in its immediate surroundings : and almost automatically possessed substantial connections with those sections of society set to oppose it—articulately or inarticulately.

But there are important points of comparison between the Indo-Burmese experience of recent times and the Russian experience of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries : points of comparison which have been forcefully and pointedly taken up by historians of India and Russia in important essays in the recent past. In fact, a common experience of poverty and late industrialization link the modern history of Russia with that of the colonial world. And the story of dissent cannot be told independent of this background—for it is frequently that background which distinguishes the nature of protest here from what went on elsewhere. An instance of this is the position of professionals in these societies. Late industrialization has frequently meant the import of ideas and institutions from the more industrialized world (western judicial and medical practices, educational institutions, services such as insurance etc.) : but these developments took place within an essentially agrarian society. And in such circumstances, professionals play a role in all major movements which is quite unlike that played by their counterparts in France, Britain or the U.S.A. Not automatically integrated into the protests of the broad urban middle class, where persons associated with industry have considerable weight, professionals in late industrializing nations frequently are the main focus of social respect and public attention outside the gentry, and have substantial rural appeal, which was the case in both Russia and British India.

But the role of the gentry cannot be ignored either. In fact, two features stand out in the following contributions on the many faces of protest in agrarian societies where community ties remained strong. One, the leading role that the gentry played so often in articulating rural protest, despite being themselves in a relatively privileged position. Country chiefs in Upper Burma, Mirasdars in Tanjore and the Bengali and Russian gentry, all gave leadership to people in the countryside against an intrusive authority. Secondly, protest among the poor was not necessarily drawn to a revolutionary cause.

Protest, when it did run counter to the aspirations of the gentry or the intelligentsia, even took a form that the latter perceived as reactionary. Such was the case with poor Muslims in Calcutta (vide Suranjan Das's essay) and the Nama-sudra peasantry in East Bengal (vide Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's essay), whose actions threatened the nationalist movement of the Bengali gentry. Even in late nineteenth century Russia, enthusiastic young men from the towns, who strove 'to go to the people', were often handed over to the police by suspicious peasants.

Thus many protest situations have common interfaces, and comparisons may reveal laws underlying more than one society. This does not, however, necessarily signify a common implication to each act of protest. Points of comparison and common interest may hold together a particular approach to the study of protest in historical perspective. But ultimately there are aspects in each situation which set laws to themselves : aspects whose history must undoubtedly, if regrettably, be admitted to be outside scientific explanation. Received wisdom or blind faith are poor substitutes. These essays concern incidents which, in many cases, if not all, involved din and rancour ; perhaps the historian will have to admit that at one level, that was all they were : tales of anger, 'full of sound and fury' and, ultimately, perhaps sadly, 'signifying nothing.'

I

POLICE TAX AND TRADERS' PROTEST IN BENGAL 1793-1798

BASUDEB CHATTOPADHYAY

The attempt towards the imposition of colonial forms of control involved, at almost every stage, a complex process of interaction with pre-existing social groups at different levels of their formation. Sullen and muted in some spheres, violent and exacerbated in others, these reactions, taken together, constitute the stuff of popular protest in colonial politics. However, in most of the current discourses on such protests in early colonial Bengal, the rebellious peasant has come out as the natural hero. Developing largely as a reaction to earlier and uncritical assumptions about the docility of Indian peasantry—ascrivable largely to the inhibitive effects and structural peculiarities of rural society—some of the more recent studies clearly indicate an express concern to redress a balance in historiography. As a result, it all looks rather different now. The shadowy silhouettes of faceless peasant masses are now being replaced by the imposing image of the rebels, imbued with a consciousness of their own and a determination to turn the world upside down.¹ The treatment has reached such a level of sophistication that at times, seemingly casual and involuntary actions are interpreted as native symbols of articulation. Curiously enough, with the return of the peasants—in the latest round as insurgents—many other social groups tend to fall by the wayside. But just as colonial pressures were multi-faceted, attacking the structure of the old order at numerous contact points, reactions to such pressures involved a wide variety of people, at different points of time. Further, there were important differences in the way that different sections of the people tried to come to terms with or challenge their rulers. In conformity with several others in the present volume, this paper shares the belief that an awareness of the multiplex character and multiclass basis of reactions is crucial to any historical understanding of popular protests in colonial India.

This paper deals with the reactions of the 'inland trader resident in the bazars of the different towns and ganjes of Bengal' to the Police Tax, imposed on them in 1793. This incident is worth recounting for four different reasons. First, it is the earliest recorded incident of traders' protest in colonial Bengal which successfully drew within its ambit a very large number of participants. Secondly, the sheer extent of the outbreak zone, stretching from Shahabad in Western Bihar to Chittagong in the easternmost fringe invest it with a significance generally denied to more localized incidents of comparable nature. Thirdly, despite very real differentials, the bazar, at the fundamental level, combated the measure with a rare singularity of purpose. A shared perception of threat helped to mobilize the widely disparate groups of traders and shopkeepers to a course of agitation which was so typically mercantile in character that it could effectively persist under sharply divergent conditions. The differences between the Chapra market of 1794, Varanasi bazars of 1810-11² and Mulji Jetha market of 1932,³ to take one example, are too obvious to need underscoring. What places them and many other bazars besides, in a historical continuum, was their insistence on *hartal* as the principal form of articulating traders' displeasure with the government's policy. It was so instinctive and indigenous an expression of the discontent of the bazar that the familiar colonial device of looking for 'ringleaders' and 'manipulators' behind any protest often enticed the officials to wrong tracks. Finally, the fact that the Bengal Police Tax of 1793, like the Varanasi House Tax of 1810, was withdrawn in the wake of sustained protest, raised important questions regarding the effectiveness of the traders' protest techniques. Why did the Company, not otherwise credited for its tender receptivity to popular feelings at this period, refrain from unleashing the full weight of coercive instruments over which it had already established an official monopoly?

Before getting into all this, a short digression is necessary on the existing state of knowledge about the rural markets of early colonial Bengal. For, after all this is the peg to hang our story on. The strength and the resilience of the bazar as the crucial mediating sector of the economy is recently being subjected to a careful and scholarly investigation.⁴ Likewise, its role in politics in the context of conflict between the marketeers and the industrialists, in the first part of the present century, has been skilfully dealt with.⁵ All these, however, are in the main, concerned with the relatively modern period

when, as Washbrook has recently pointed out,⁶ the nature of colonial state underwent great change, when railways and steamships substantially expanded the hinterland and helped to open out the production of the interior to wider opportunities and when, as a result of all this, the structure and networks of the bazar became increasingly more sophisticated and attuned to wider economic forces at work than ever before. In short, the bazar, both in the economic and spatial sense, went through a significant process of change over time. But far too little is as yet known about its structure, distribution and the stage of mercantile formation in pre-colonial and early colonial Bengal; and so any attempt at generalization, at this stage, is bound to be hazardous. K. N. Chaudhuri's three-tier functional classification of Indian markets,⁷ useful though it is in the context of interregional or sea-borne trade, does not quite help us to conceptualize the structure and organization of local trade of interior Bengal. C. A. Bayly has recently come out with a remarkably thorough and penetrating analysis of the fate of towns, merchants and service-people of North India during the period of transition between the heyday of the last indigenous states and the establishment of the mature colonial system after 1857.⁸ It now seems fairly clear that although the forms and trappings of state changed from time to time, the merchant class and the institutions which were predicated on it, adjusted themselves with the changes. As a result, 'they remained the basis of commerce and political life of the later colonial period.'⁹ Unfortunately we do not have for eastern India of the eighteenth century, any similarly detailed exploration of the these. It is necessary to say all this because in this paper we do not pretend to address ourselves to these broad issues, first because these lie beyond our immediate area of enquiry and second because these will require far greater amount of empirical research than we have put to it so far. Some works are in progress which would hopefully lead us beyond Khemchand, Chintaman or Mathuradas—our local variants of Virji Vora or Mulla Abdul Ghafur—to the base composed of rural bazars and *hats*. Till then, the overall picture is bound to remain incomplete and the historian can only hope to extract all possible information from whatever little evidence comes his way.

Against this admittedly inadequate and somewhat blurred perspective, we seek to highlight mercantile behaviour in the specific context of a fiscal measure which was widely perceived as a threat to their calling. The first part pieces together the

vignettes hurriedly drawn by the district officers about the state of local trade in their respective districts, on the eve of the introduction of the Police Tax. This is followed by an account of the growth of the protest itself, between 1794 and 1797. Finally, an attempt has been made to explain the probable motives that led the Company to withdraw the Police Tax.

It is by now a commonplace that Cornwallis' administration coincided with a trend, initiated earlier, towards the establishment of complete governmental monopoly over the legitimate instruments of coercion. The formal demilitarisation of the zamindars having, in the main, been carried through, it was found necessary to provide for an adequate structure of authority which would help the Company to maintain law and order to the extent necessary for the public safety of the Company.¹⁰ The means at the disposal of the ruling oligarchy in England for the maintenance of public order being largely inapplicable in the colonial context, and the traditional mechanism of control having proved insufficient, Cornwallis decisively opted for a bureaucratically organized stipendiary police force in Bengal.¹¹ Thus, by Regulation XXIII of 1793 professional police, variously condemned in contemporary England as 'Continental', 'tyrannous' and 'un-English', was introduced in Bengal. But all this at once involved a cost factor which the Company, in view the pre-existing demands on its resources, was frankly unwilling to meet. It was therefore decided to raise the necessary fund by imposing a new tax on the 'merchants, traders and shopkeepers'. Twofold justifications were offered for this.¹² First, since the merchants, by the very nature of their vocation, benefited in a more particular degree than others by the new police, they should contribute for its upkeep. Second, since the abolition of the *sayer* they paid no immediate tax to the state. Neither of these carried conviction, not even with those who were to implement it. The first was clearly an afterthought, invoked to justify a measure which was undoubtedly prompted by a different set of imperatives. The second flawed on the count that if the object of the abolition of the *sayer*, as stated, was to free the internal trade from the vexatious trammels of countless duties, then its substitution, albeit in a different guise, contradicted the very purpose of the earlier abolition. As one collector, unable to swallow his scruples, admitted, 'the abolition of the saier was certainly a measure of utmost benefit to these provinces in many important respects, but the Police Tax, on its present footing does not appear a very eligible substitution.' Not many of course were so outspoken in their

disapproval and most, as usual preferred to play it safe and cave in. But a good many of them, confronted with the hazards the policy entailed, presumably did not put forth any extra effort. This was indeed a piquant development, but more of this, later on.

The Regulation did not specify the standard of assessment. As always, it dealt with the generalities and left the onerous task of working out the modalities to the District officers. The circular of the Governor General in Council, however, offered some broad guidelines.¹⁵ The expense of police establishment in each district should not exceed the amount to be raised by Police Tax from that district. The officers were enjoined to adjust the amount that was to be levied from each town, *ganj* and *bazar* within a district. The sum to be assessed on these was to be in proportion to the annual amount of *sayer* collections formerly levied on them. The *jama* on which deductions and compensations had been granted to the landlords on account of the abolition of the *sayer* was to be taken as the standard of these annual collections. In the official parlance, 'as the total of the former annual *sayer* collections is to the total of the sum to be raised for the expence of the police of the whole of the collectorship, so is the amount of the former annual collections of each town, *gunge* and *bazar*, to the sum to be new assessed upon it.'¹⁴ With respect to the mode of levying the sum assessed, it was suggested that it might be raised by a tax on warehouses, shops and, in some places, by assessing a specific sum upon the different descriptions of merchants, traders and shopkeepers. The assessment having been fixed, the collection was to be committed to two or more of the principal merchants in each town, *bazar* and *ganj*. This, again, was soon to serve as the orthodox model for many other spheres as well. 'British rule had always rested on 'native agency' at subordinate levels. It could be conducted in no other way.'¹⁵ Apart from keeping the administrative cost at the lowest level possible, this practice also helped the process of legitimisation. Two things need to be underscored in this connection. To prevent any possible misunderstanding, it was clearly laid down that the proposed measure was not to be looked upon 'as a voluntary contribution ; on the contrary, it is to be considered as a tax imposed by the authority.'¹⁶ Secondly, in reply to a pointed query from a wavering Magistrate it was clearly stated that no part of the tax for defraying the expense of the police establishments was to be levied on British free merchants or traders, even if residing within the aforesaid areas.¹⁷ Judged

by the prevailing standards, this was a minor concession and the pickings were likely to be small. But in such small preferences one may profitably look for the inklings of that malignant trend which was to crystallize, in course of time, into the transparently racist basis of the Raj.

In retrospect it seems that the Company's government was proceeding along a set of untested assumptions about the scope of former *sayer* collections on the one hand and the presence of a fairly numerous and well-distributed class of resident traders in different districts on the other. It was, for instance, assumed that prior to its abolition, the *sayer* was collected almost exclusively from the resident traders—that is to say, those who had fixed establishments—and not from the petty pedlars who sold their goods in the periodic rural markets (*hats*). This can be inferred from the order that although the annual amount of *sayer* collections was to be taken as the standard reference, the new tax was to be raised entirely from merchants, traders and shopkeepers, to the exclusion of the *hats*. But such an assumption was palpably incorrect. In fact, the old *sayer* was collected from a wide variety of sources, inclusive of *hats*. The Kanungo records reveal that in Shahabad, for instance, on the eve of its abolition, the total *sayer* collection was Rs. 9958-13-9-1 of which, the share of *hats* alone was Rs. 5486-8-17.¹⁸ This is indicative of a fairly general pattern. In most of the districts, especially Dacca, Mymensing, Jessore, 24 Parganas and Cooch-Bihar, the lion's share of the *sayer* was collected from *hats* having no permanent *golahs* whatsoever. On the contrary, the *goladars* and *dukandars* generally paid a land tax for the grounds on which their *golahs* were erected, and this they doubtless continued to pay to the respective proprietors of the land even after the abolition of the *sayer*. Blissfully unaware of these complexities, the framers of the new Regulation placed the tax-burden squarely on the shoulders of the resident traders who, in addition to paying the ground rent, were now called upon to pay Police Tax.

But this was not all. The basic underlying assumption, that in each district merchants of the above categories could easily be found in adequate numbers to enable the collectors to raise the necessary fund, was even more inaccurate. Before Buchanan-Hamilton's Bengal Survey, the policy-makers did not enjoy the benefits of any comprehensive and reliable compendium of statistical information relating to the occupational distribution of the population of Bengal. Whatever information of this kind reached upwards was, by their very nature,

patchy and impressionistic. Hence these could hardly constitute any rational basis for this kind of a fiscal measure, requiring far greater amount of empirical details. Predictably therefore the collectors, once they began their work, became acutely aware of the contradiction between some of the artificial constructs about Bengali rural society still fondly nourished by the policy makers at the superior levels and the complexities of the local situation as experienced by them. They realized, for instance, that the rural markets of Bengal were highly differentiated in character and therefore, the nature of inland trade in one district was sharply different from that of another. In their periodic reports they began to convey a far more realistic appraisal of the variegated nature of inland markets than any, hitherto possessed by the Company. These reports admittedly suffered from many limitations. Not all the district officers were men of uniformly high ability. Raw and untutored about the rural society, they inevitably depended on native agents. This in turn, meant that the veracity of their reports were contingent on the accuracy of information supplied by the local enumerators. And it appears that on several recorded instances, the latter had their own axes to grind. Finally, cognizant of the entrenched suspicion of the country-people about such enquiries, the native agents were firmly instructed not to make any enquiry into the amount of capitals or the extent of the trade of the merchants from whom the tax was to be levied, nor to call upon them to give in a statement or to show their books. 'Such measures must necessary tend to alarm and render them averse to the payment of required contributions.'¹⁹ The apprehension of the Company was certainly not unfounded for, years later, Buchanan-Hamilton himself had to countenance the same hostility.²⁰ In simple terms it implied that many facts and figures supplied by the agents and subsequently passed on to the Governor General were in the nature of guess work. Despite these understandable shortcomings, these reports provide a fairly intimate picture of the market-structures of the different districts of Bengal. It is to this that we shall presently turn.

From these early reports it is possible to construct three different, though not mutually exclusive, types of trading activities prevailing in the different districts of Bengal around 1793. First, there were some districts whose exchange transactions were, in the main, beyond the ambit of the local *bazars*. Consequently in such districts the number of resident traders was infinitesimally small. Christopher Keating found that the trade

of Birbhum was not carried on by the residents. He could find no more than five *golahs* where articles of trade were collected 'for packing and exportation' and six large and principal bazars 'where the people holding Dukauns can properly be termed shopkeepers. Excepting only the trade of these few places, commerce is carried on at the Hauts (which are numerous) and conducted by advances to the Ryots, from whom the trader by his agent collects from each individual the articles advanced for, and conveys it away.'²¹ In short, the bulk of the trade in the district was in the hands of the outsiders while 'in the district itself there is hardly to be found ten men of property sufficient to constitute them merchants.' Mymensing offered comparable features. Here again, the most considerable part of the commerce, on account of the water communication throughout the year, was found out to be engrossed by those whom the Magistrate describes as the 'Dacca merchants.' They at certain seasons, made advances to the ryots for their crops, through itinerant *gomastahs*, who having no fixed abode received 'their purchases at the villages where they had made their engagements and disappeared.' Thus, almost all settlers in the *hat*, *bazar* and *ganjes* were 'inconsiderable traders'.²² Likewise, in the district of Dacca-Jalalpoore it was found that the major part and the most opulent merchants, many of whom were described as 'Greeks, Armenians, Portuguese and Moguls'; traded in the interior but preferred to reside in the town of Dacca.²³ It was further observed that there were many merchants who resided in the district but had no *golahs* there. They generally made ready-money purchases and transported their goods to Murshidabad, Patna and Calcutta where they had *golahs*.

Further east, in the district of Chittagong the aforesaid trend was found to have reached extreme proportions. From the enquiries made by Shearman Bird and his successor Cornelius Fryer in 1793 it clearly appears that the district, though quite extensive, offered no inland commerce. The inhabitants, with few exceptions, lived entirely by husbandry. The minute subdivision of the landed property in the district was said to have arisen from the prescriptive right which the occupants had enjoyed, since the formation of the first *Jamabandi* by Verelst, of transmitting their lands by inheritance, mortgage or sale, and from the recognition of that right in the practice of the *Diwani Adalat*. All these factors had fixed a special value on such property in Chittagong. The result of all this was the emergence of a body of landholders unknown elsewhere in

Bengal. Though nominally mere tenants of a larger estate, they in fact felt themselves confirmed by custom and legal precedents, as the actual proprietors of the soil. 'Each individual family forms an independent household in the neighbourhood of its little hereditary estate and supports itself on the surplus produce of its cultivation. . . . such few articles as their own lands may not supply, or their own household . . . may not manufacture, are procured from the petty haunts held in the open air . . . all over the province. These petty haunts are the only markets in the province and no resident shopkeeper is to be found in any one of them.'²⁴ Given these conditions in the interior, the whole commerce of the district was found to have concentrated on the town of Islamabad; but this was exclusively a commerce of exportation by sea. Islamabad was, to quote from another contemporary report, 'a seaport constantly resorted to by vessels from Arracan and the Maldives and occasionally visited by English ships and by the ship of foreign European nations.'²⁵ In short, the commerce was 'nearly engrossed' by the European settlers. Among their concerns rice was the principal article. This rice, again, was not brought to the market by any resident intermediate native merchant or *arhatiya*, but was collected on advances in small proportions from the surplus crop of each petty husbandman at the time of harvest; and being never warehoused till brought into the *golahs* of Islamabad, could not be objects of taxation. In fact, the collector found in 1793 that 'the only warehouses out of the town are the private golahs of the Canongoe families (sic) among whom it has been an immemorial custom to keep large and annually encreasing deposits of Rice inherited from father to son.'²⁶ Hence the only objects of taxation that the collector's enquiries could fix upon were the *poddars*, *moodies* and other petty shopkeepers of two small *bazars* in the town. And keeping in view the fact that the *hats* were not to be taxed, the utmost that he could hope to raise, by way of Police Tax on these small traders, was a paltry sum of thirty seven rupees per month.

We may pause here for a while and briefly compare some of the common themes that emerge from the collectors' reports of the aforesaid districts. They all seemed to agree on the point that the directive to collect the tax on old *sayer* rates exclusively from the resident traders was anachronistic in principle and had unnecessarily exposed the latter to avoidable hardship. This was so for three reasons: the bulk of the old *sayer* was collected, inter alia, from numerous *hats* which

were now exempted ; it now fell squarely on the shoulders of resident traders who in districts such as these, where trade were mainly engrossed by the outsiders, were numerically small and economically vulnerable ; since the abolition of the *sayer* they not just continued to pay ground-rent or *chundinah* to the zamindars, but the latter, in many instances, doubled the *chundinah*. The message they sought to convey was fairly clear ; if these traders were now additionally required to pay the equivalent of *sayer* in the rates required, it 'would operate as so heavy a burthen that many would sink under it.'²⁷ Generally insensitive, and at times downright disdainful of any alternative suggestions, the government persisted in its course. The result, as we shall see, was a near disaster.

All these, it might conceivably be argued, were problems specific to districts whose total volume of local trade was by no means marginal, but was essentially engrossed by outsiders and, therefore, largely out of the ambit of the local *bazars*. At the extreme end of the spectrum were those districts whose sheer marginality of local trade rendered the tax base extremely narrow and unhealthy. In Jessore the collector could find no large *gunge* or substantial merchants. The figures that he adduced were indicative of the predicament he was placed in. The amount of the whole *sayer jama* of this collectorship, at the time of its abolition, was Rs. 19,237-7-19 of which, according to the collector's estimate, three fourths arose from 'thaw bazar', i.e., open *hats*. The principle of the exclusion of open *hats* in the calculation of Police Tax thus meant that the collector was to base his estimate on Rs. 4401.2.11 which was presumably collected from places other than the *hats*. In early 1793 he was able to compute only 38 *ganjes* and *bazars* in which merchants and shopkeepers resided. None of these were large enough, and even on a liberal estimate he could not hope to raise more than Rs. 1755.15.²⁸ This was quite understandably a far cry from the required amount and even the Board of Revenue (Police) was forced to admit that 'the state of commerce in that part of the country does not admit of so large a fund being provided.' Despite all this, however, the collector was put constantly under pressure to enhance the collection. On further enquiry, made on the basis of the reports of the assessors, he computed S.R. 1,80,324-8 as the estimate of the capital of the native merchants of Jessore.²⁹ This too was considered to be an underestimate and *amins* had to be deputed. But as we shall subsequently see, this was a step fraught with dangerous consequences.

Hidgelee, Tamluk and the neighbouring areas offered roughly similar pictures. In Hidgelee, for instance, there were no warehouses, and only three *bazars*. All the vendible articles in this district, it was reported, 'find their way to the *hauts*, which in other districts are taken to bazars and gunges.' These *hauts* were held in open places twice a week. But the district officer reported that there were few, hardly any, merchants and traders ; concerns carried on by them were extremely limited ; and there was not one throughout the district whose dealings in the course of the year exceed Rs. 200.³⁰ The last statement was probably incorrect, but he was firm on his belief that the required amount could not be raised by ordinary means. In Tamluk, the Magistrate could find only four established *ganjes* which in his opinion could yield little more than seven or eight hundred rupees per annum ; but that too with difficulty because of the smallness and fluctuating nature of the traffic. The merchants of Saheb Gunge in Tamluk pargana presented an *arzee* in which, while expressing gratitude for the abolition of *sayer*, they regretted the decision to impose Police Tax on them on two grounds : first, the volume of trade had suffered a contraction ; second, 'when the *sayer* was collected then we did not pay the *ghurr Jumma*, or house rent, which we now pay.'³¹ The *arzee* predictably fell on deaf ears.

Shahabad in the western periphery and Tirhut on the northern boundary presented much the same sort of problems. In Shahabad, at the time of its abolition, the total *sayer* collection was to the tune of Rs. 9958-13-9-1 in which the share of *hauts*, *ganjes* and *bazars*³² were Rs. 5486-8-17, Rs. 2137-9-19 and Rs. 831-4-9 respectively. These figures have interesting implications. As Thomas Brooke, the Shahabad Magistrate commented, the insignificant amount of the whole of the former *sayer* duties was indicative of 'the poverty of the inhabitants' and 'of the little trade that is carried on in this district.'³³ These also indicate the relative insignificance of *ganjes* and *bazars*. It was very correctly apprehended that rigorous enforcement of the tax was likely to result in the flight of the merchants from Shahabad to the neighbouring district of Benares which, by some logic that passes common understanding, enjoyed immunity from the tax. It was, as we shall see, not an empty threat. Likewise, the Tirhoot Collector reported, 'Golahs, Gunges, Bazars, Beparis, manufacturers, the inland trader and the foreign purchasers (without which river flows to no purpose and the earth's production to no end) exist only in the imagination.'³⁴

Notwithstanding the broad difference between the two clusters of districts, there were certain features which both shared in common. In both, *hat* constituted the fundamental locus of exchange. In both, therefore, resident merchants and traders were few and the concerns carried on by them extremely limited. Finally the benefits they supposed to have derived from the abolition of the *sayer* were only notional, because they continued to pay ground rent—variously called *chundinah* or *ghurr jummah*—to the zamindars for their shops or *golahs*. Therefore they could never cease to regard the new tax as a thoroughly unjust imposition, detrimental to their interest. There is, finally, a certain piquancy in the situation: a good many collectors increasingly came to share some of these feelings and express their disapproval of the policy as well, albeit in a roundabout way. Colonial bureaucracy, as we shall again have occasion to notice, was fraught with many contradictions at different levels, and these occasionally provided unanticipated bonus points to the aggrieved traders.

There was yet a third cluster of districts where the resident traders were not numerically small but were unevenly spread. This inevitably meant that the collection of the new tax according to the criterion specified—'merchants traders and shopkeepers in all towns, bazars and ganjes to be assessed according to the *sayer* collections made therein'—involved great hardship to the few merchants belonging to those *bazars* which had once been buoyant, but had declined subsequently. As the Board of Revenue (Police) was constrained to admit, 'since the period of the abolition of those duties (i.e., *sayer*), a considerable revolution has taken place in the trade there is not now perhaps one'³⁵ It further added that 'the decline of trade in some places and the improvement of it in others has been such that the late *sayer* collections can furnish little data for fixing the assessment.'

A few examples will serve to illustrate the point. In Purnea district, the wholesale commerce centred on the two towns of Purnea and Dimia Gola. The remainder were numerous but individually inconsiderable. This implied that the burden of taxation was likely to fall on these two centres. But this involved a potential risk the collector was aware of: 'should any alternation take place in the course of that trade, it will become necessary to revise the assessment.'³⁶ From the detailed *pargana*-rates it further appears that only five out of fifty three *parganas* in the district were assessed above one thousand rupees a year. Together these five—Havelly Purnea,

Bhauteagopalpore, Soojapore, Amirabad and Alamganj—were to contribute more than fifty percent of the total, sanctioned for the district. At the other end, there were 13 *parganas* which were assessed less than Rs. 10 each.³⁷ Such imbalance in the concentration of the resident traders was characteristic of several other districts as well. In many of the jurisdictions of Nadia the *ganjes* and *bazars* were so few that it was found impossible to raise the desired amount while in others these were so numerous that the collection was likely to exceed the sum wanted.³⁸ Again, the old *sayer* rate predictably turned out to be a poor guide. It indicated, for instance, that there were no fewer than eighteen important *hats* in Nadia, none of which paid less than Rs. 100 by way of *Sayer* duties. Now the *hats* having been exempted, the pressure was mounted on those who had any fixed establishments. Thus, when the collector divided the merchants in four hierarchical orders, 'wholesale dealers, importers and exporters' were found to be very few and confined chiefly to the *ganj* at Sooksagar.³⁹ In Rajshahi, at least two important *ganjes*, namely Seebgunge Syalgara and Jaffergunge, had so greatly declined since the period when the *sayer* was abolished that the few remaining resident traders were hardly sufficient to pay the tax at the old rate.⁴⁰ Likewise, in the Bengal portion of the Ramghur district, Raghunathpore was the only town which offered any scope for taxation.⁴¹

But, of all the districts belonging to this category Tipperah provides an extreme picture, 'Several of the gunges and bazars from the fluctuating state of commerce and other local circumstances have become waste, while others have on the contrary become more flourished.' The traders and merchants in this district were divided into seven broad types, each further subdivided, according to their estimated income, into four subtypes: *Goladars*, *Beparis*, *Capooriahs*, *Podars*, *Mudies*, *Dokandars*, *Khoordean Bauzey Beparis*.⁴² In the distribution-sheet it appears that Luckypore Bunder was the largest *ganj* in the district. The most wealthy traders resided here. It contained 316 *golas*, and carried an annual traffic of well over 3 lakhs of rupees. Next in point of size and extent, but decidedly inferior to it in every respect was Roypore Bunder. But the change in the flow of trade becomes evident from the fact that earlier on Roypore paid far more than Luckypore by way of *Sayer*. Similarly, Pargana Amberabad, which had earlier been in a flourishing state and used to pay considerable amount of *Sayer* duties had first began to decline because of the

withdrawal of traders and then became virtually 'deserted.'⁴³ All these clearly illustrated that the *Sayer* rates, apart from having flawed on other counts, did not reflect the changes in the volume and course of inland trade that had taken place in some districts in the period between the abolition of the *sayer* and the promulgation of the Police Tax. As a result, those who tried to eke out their living in places like Amberabad, suddenly found themselves confronted with a crushing disaster.

Finally, the terms 'merchants, traders and shopkeepers' were interpreted differently in different districts. The collectors were free to interpret them in the light of their local experiences. Such experiences, as we have just seen, were so different from region to region that the tabular needs of reducing variety of people connected with markets to given denominations involved endless anomalies. Instances abound. Cornelius Fryer, when he was the collector of Chittagong, could find none whom he could call merchant. There his first category was shopkeepers which included those who had shops (*dukans*) in petty bazars and villages and retailed grain and other articles. Next in order were the traders who exposed articles for sale in public *hats* held in open places.⁴⁴ The same collector was thereafter transferred to Beerbhoom where he at once invested different meanings to these terms. In Beerbhoom merchants formed the first category which included all wholesale dealers of every description resident in the Zillah. Next were the traders which included all merchants not residing but trading in the district through agents, in grain, cloth etc. Shopkeepers came last; it meant all retailers of grain and other articles as well as manufacturers of iron, brass, copper and tin.⁴⁵

Random classifications of this sort characterized other districts as well. To the Dinajpur collector, merchants formed the first category and included 'cooteewallahs' i.e., bankers, and six types of *goladars* dealing in betelnut, sugar, salt, cotton, grain and gunnies; this was followed by *buldiahs* and *paikars*. Finally, in the category of shopkeepers were lumped together all retailers ranging from goldsmiths and braziers to *tarkariwallahs* and *ghaswallahs*.⁴⁶ A further complication was introduced by the fact that some of these nomenclatures allowed for wide regional variations. One interesting example will suffice. *Buldiahs* in Dinajpur are described as 'itinerant traders in various sorts of articles and those residents in the district who buy of the wholesale traders to retail to petty

merchants in the different parts of the country.'⁴⁷ In Murshidabad the *buldeahs* were found to occupy an inferior position : 'these persons are petty traders who carry their grains & ca. upon bullocks from market to market which they cater for such other articles of trade as they expect will bring them the largest profit on their return home again.'⁴⁸ In Nadia, however, they were indistinguishable from petty pedlars : 'Persons who bring grains of all kinds from distant markets to sell to the shopkeepers in their own villages.'⁴⁹ Thus, while in two other districts they belonged to the second category, in Nadia, they were placed in the third. All these obfuscating complications not just made the tasks of the collectors difficult ; these rendered the assessment erratic as well.

The logic of incomprehension, ascribable partly to ignorance about the countryside and partly to the avid quest for additional sources of revenue, created other problems in its wake. One final example should suffice to illustrate the plight of the assessees. A forced duality of roles was occasionally thrust upon some artisans and manufacturers. The weavers, especially those who worked for the company's investments, were the worst sufferers. They sometimes received advances or payments in grain. But as soon as they went to the markets for selling these, they were categorised as traders and, as such, liable to the payment of Police Tax. Apprehending difficulties in their own sphere, quite a few Commercial Residents pleaded on behalf of such weavers. But the government, already faced with the gruesome prospect of accumulating arrears, refused to relent. J. Cheap, the commercial Resident at Surul, was one such who raised the issue. He was informed that 'weavers who appear on the capacity of the merchants or traders are, I apprehend, liable to the Police Tax.'⁵⁰ Similarly R. W. Cox, the Commercial Resident at Golagore was told, in reply to his intervention, that the weavers were assessed, 'not as weavers but as acting in the additional capacity of merchants and traders.'⁵¹ This was not true, because the Midnapore collector had imposed the tax on 315 weavers along with other manufacturers, and it received prompt official sanction.⁵² But its interest lies elsewhere. 'It is a fine study in the inner contradictions of a bureaucracy to see how in many of the letters the Commercial Residents assume the role of defenders of the rights of the oppressed weavers against the tyranny of the collector and his peons.'

II

How did the resident traders react to all this? Available evidences unerringly indicate that despite the relative absence of any protracted agitational run-up, the traders made their resentment felt, at the level of both assessment and collection. The district administration found it virtually impossible to select the assessors in the manner prescribed by the Regulation. The creditable merchants, traders and shopkeepers of almost all the districts refused to undertake the charge straightway. A few of course, wanted to take greedy advantage of the situation. Christopher Keating found that although no principal merchant of Birbhum offered himself as collector, certain persons 'called Mundulls, who had hopes in this way to renew a consequence, which had been often attended with the most pernicious effects' readily agreed.⁵³ The same kind of motive occasionally impelled a few others to seek to accept the charge as farmers. These offers were turned down for understandable reasons. The collector of Nadia tried hard to persuade the creditable merchants to co-operate; but the exercise was futile. 'No man, I fear, undertakes the duty without some sinister view of cheating both government and the contributors.'⁵⁴ His apprehension was perfectly justified. In Purnea, principal merchants 'having to a man refused to undertake', the task of assessment was entrusted to their servants. After a lapse of many months they delivered the account which was found 'faulty and oppressive in the extreme.' The report of the collector of Purnea vividly portrays the latent dangers of an easier escape-route :

'The poorer classes of people who subsist by selling tobacco, beetle, fish, milk &ca in the market and in their houses, have been assessed in a sum, that almost surpasses credibility, whereas the contributions of those merchants who from the extent of their dealings ought, and it was expected, would have borne, the principal part of the burthen appears as inadequate to their means as the tax on the other classes, has been oppressive. This I can only account for, and attribute, to the venality of the assessors, who must have derived some advantage that have induced them to be thus partial and lenient, to their own principals.'⁵⁵

Thus, neither gentle persuasion, nor threat of fine, could

induce the bulk of the merchants to oblige by compliance. The collector of Dacca summed up the general feeling of the District Officers, when he wrote, 'the repugnance is so very great that injunctions proving vain I have several times been obliged to coerce by intimidating menaces (sic) of exacting the fine.'⁵⁶ The weight of accumulating evidence was sufficient to convince the Board of Revenue, that there was a uniform and 'great reluctance on the part of persons so chosen to undertake the duty, and an almost universal spirit of procrastination in the execution of it.' This was indeed evidenced in the fact that more than two years after the promulgation of the Regulation, the primary task of fixing the assessment was yet incomplete. The Board prevailed upon the government to authorize a fixed salary to be paid to the assessors. But this predictably failed to entice the merchants and the collectors were constrained to appoint *amins*, *mushreefs*, *tehsildars*, *darogahs*, and, in some cases, even informers for the purpose. Neither of these yielded the desired result. Embezzlement of fund by the *tehsildars* and characteristic highhandedness of the *darogahs* resulted in the self-perpetuating spirals of vexatious enquiries and accumulated arrears.

Why this unwillingness? The Board of Revenue, itself called upon to explain the deficit, fabricated a ready answer: 'The duty being imposed on the assessors as a gratuitous task without any pecuniary award,' the merchants refused to come forward. This indeed was echoed by some collectors whose failure to complete the process of assessment sent them scurrying for explanation. Thus the Purnea Collector wrote, 'in anything they undertake if a satisfaction is not allowed, they will most assuredly help themselves which all the vigilance and care of those over them, cannot prevent.'⁵⁷ In the context of the prevailing official opinion about the native character, the above explanation came in handy. But they were in fact deluding themselves; for, back in 1793 the Nadia Collector reported that although he offered to make an allowance, he could not prevail on any of them to take the management of the collection of it.⁵⁸ The Dacca merchants in a body represented to the collector in 1796 that 'if even these were paid by government, their other avocations would not admit of their undertaking the task'. All these, taken together with the fact even after the granting of the award, the *tehsildari* establishment could not be done away with, strongly suggest that the Board, while attributing the aversion to lack of pecuniary incentive, was not at all conversant with the nature of opposition. In

the perception of the traders, the task of assessment was integrally connected with the Police Tax itself, and since the whole was looked upon with positive disapproval, there was no question of piecemeal compliance except, as in certain cases, under duress. Social sanction—the most potent and effective traditional weapon in the armoury of rural society—was now pressed into service. 'The great objection,' wrote the Dacca Collector, 'they have is the opprobrium they shall incur from the inhabitants if they consent to undertake the measure.'⁵⁹ This was the feeling of the collector of Bhagalpore: 'Not an individual would take upon him the task—some pleading the odium it would bring upon them, others their private affairs, and all that it was a business they had not been accustomed to . . . adding I was the malik and they were helpless . . . all seem determined not to have anything to do with the assessment.'⁶⁰ Significantly, in these cases not a word is to be found, either in the few surviving petitions or in the district officers' reports which might indicate that this solidarity developed along caste lines. At this base level, many trades and manufactures had dominant caste characters. But arguably they were not prime determinants of the opposition to the Police Tax.

What initially began as refusal to undertake the task of assessors, soon developed into steadfast refusal to pay the tax as well. In fact, at this level the District officer encountered his Achilles' Heel. The diverse categories of merchants and traders—ranging in this instance, from the big *shroffs* like Gopal Das, Monohar Das and Ratan Chand of Bhagalpur to the petty *dukandars* in the interior, distributed over a region as wide as Chittagong, Tipperah and Sylhet in the east, to Saran, Champaran and Shahabad in the west—appear to have had a shared perception of the threat. This economic corporative identity can further be gleaned from the fact that despite regional variations in leadership patterns, the language of articulation, almost everywhere, was almost the same. Leaving aside the stray instances of legalistic approach, the mercantile community generally resorted to its own characteristic forms of protest, some of which show a remarkable degree of continuity down to the present century.

The legal methods can be disposed of fairly easily. The Regulation authorised the merchants, who had reasons to feel aggrieved by the rate imposed on them, to go to *adawlut* for redress. In a few recorded instances, some substantial merchants doubtless took recourse to law, but to great many

this clause was virtually non-existent. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the unfamiliar procedures of the law courts and the time and cost attending thereto, operated as very real constraints.⁶¹ The only other legal approach within the reach of ordinary traders was to lodge petitions before the collector. After the reforms of Cornwallis, the ma-baap syndrome was already taking shape. But the collector knew his limits. As one of them candidly admitted in the context of one such petition, 'I was merely a public office of government, acting a subordinate part, being nothing more than the instrument by which the orders of my superiors were carried into execution.' Thus, in most such cases he simply forwarded the petitions to the Board and waited for instructions.⁶² As the Board's decisions on the few extant petition indicate, it cautiously refrained from taking any step that might result in a fall in public revenue or might be construed as an unauthorized change in policy. Hence, all it could offer were some minor palliative on ad-hoc basis. On several other occasions it simply turned down requests.

Thus, legal approaches offered few rewards. It is not surprising therefore, that the great body of merchants, in almost all the districts, offered more direct forms of protest. Of these, the commonest kind was the straightforward refusal to pay the assessed rate. In fact, during the early stages of the operation of the Tax, the bulk of the reports submitted by the collectors contained pointed reference to such instances of refusal. In all such cases, the collectors were under obligation to distrain the defaulters' property, whenever necessary, or to apply to the judge for taking them into confinement.⁶³ Neither of these was a simple choice and each was clogged with many complications. To distrain the property of the defaulters, as one collector ruefully admitted, was 'a precarious business and giving an opening to litigations and delay to the realization of the tax.' Furthermore, since in many districts the assessee ranged from *Goladars* to petty prostitutes, the total number had swollen to alarming proportions. With a small establishment at their disposal, the collectors found it virtually 'impossible to identify'⁶⁴ the many traders, much less, to keep track on their whereabouts. In cases where they had no attachable property, the provision was infructuous. Finally, the courts already overburdened by civil suits following the Permanent Settlement, was far from obliging. The Judge of Burdwan, for instance, bluntly turned down the Collector's request to confine the defaulters and referred the matter to Governor General instead.⁶⁵

Where none of these problems came their way, the collectors still found that distraint clauses yielded only limited results. In view of the proved effectiveness of distraint in agrarian sector, this evokes some surprise. The Collector of 24 Parganas was one of those who sought to activate the above clause. But he reached a dead end.

“When I made known to the merchants that in case of refusal to pay the amount assessed by government, their property should be attached and sold to make good the demand they candidly *in the whole body* replied, ‘I might sell their property and their persons too if I pleased.’ (emphasis added).⁶⁶

This is admittedly an exceptional instance of mercantile solidarity which proved itself capable of transcending—at least on this specific issue—its built-in limitations. But in numerous other cases the mercantile community countered the threat of distraint in either of the two ways. The first of these was desertion. This, it appears, was resorted to mainly by those who had very little immovable property that could viably be attached. The Collector of Bhagalpur admitted that it was an endless task to name all the traders and shopkeepers who had removed from the different parganas of the district, and to trace people who could convey away their whole substance was impossible.⁶⁷ The Shahabad Collector reported that indigent traders in his district were prone to move to Benares district which enjoyed immunity from the tax.⁶⁸ Migration, it seems, was more frequently resorted to in the peripheral districts like those bordering on Benares, Nepal or Maratha territories, though interdistrict migration was not altogether rare.

The other reaction was the typically mercantile form of collective protest which was inconceivable without some degree of solidarity and cohesion. *Hartal*, in fact, was one of the most effective instruments at the disposal of the *bazar*. Temporary hartal and permanent closure of establishments were together found in operation from 1793 to 1796. The Collector of Saran reported that in Chapra every shopkeeper in the place and neighbourhood shut up his shop and declared that they found it impossible to continue their occupations if the measure was persisted in.⁶⁹ Likewise, in Shahabad, the merchants and traders in many places shut up their shops for several days, refusing to sell the most common necessities.⁷⁰

These places, the collector admitted, had evinced the most determined opposition and had absolutely withheld payments of the tax. The situation in 24 Parganas was no different. 'The persons who are included in the above tax, one and all declare, that on any force being used to compel them to pay, they will relinquish their occupations and desert.'⁷¹ *Hartal* was not confined to middling and petty traders alone. Wealthy bankers and *shroffs* threatened to withdraw capital from some districts. The banking houses of Gopal Das and Manohar Das and Ratan Chand, who had extensive credit network in Bhagalpur and adjoining districts, had shut up their *Kothis* and recalled their gomastas from the interior on this account.⁷² Significantly, however, in the entire process of agitation, actual instances of physical violence and intimidation against the collecting agents were extremely rare. Only one incidence is recorded : in Palta an *amin*—while trying to collect the tax—was beaten up and driven by the traders and *kotwal* together.⁷³

In the face of such mounting discontent and accumulating arrears, the government was predictably on the lookout for the 'instigators' and 'ringleaders' who, it reasoned, prevented the traders from appreciating its true interests. In a few cases the collectors congratulated themselves for having found them. In Dacca the Collector found and prosecuted two 'ringleaders' who were inflicted corporal punishments. But in most other cases the government was on shadowy grounds. It suspected behind the scene instigation or at least connivance of interested parties on many such occasions but in the absence of cognizable evidence could not rope them in.

In fairness it should be admitted that on several occasions where persistent refusal to pay the tax were either preceded or followed by *hartals*, there is ample evidence of the involvement of local *zamindars* or the wealthy traders. This is not to suggest that the protests of the ordinary traders, in such cases, were command performances, enacted at the behest of the principals. Without a fairly widespread leaven of discontent these would not have occurred at all. The disaffection of the Zamindars and principal traders, in several recorded instances, merged with the general discontent of the petty traders within the limited context of Police Regulations and provided the protest a sharper point of focus. The zamindars were naturally aggrieved by the systematic changes that were taking place at the local level during this period. The policy of demilitarisation, systematically pursued prior to the Decennial Settlement (1789), was a necessary pre-condition for

the establishment of a new political authority. Regulation XXII, 1793 deprived the zamindars of the police powers which they had wielded so far. The new network of the collectorate and the *thana* intersected the localities and carried the writs of the government more directly in the interior than ever before.

The zamindars reacted to these in many ways. They generally tried to regain some of the coercive powers by pressurizing the government at the point where it was most vulnerable. Apprehended fall in the collection of revenue lay behind the Regulation VII of 1799 and Regulation V of 1812. Further, some of them forged an access to the official means of coercion through local but fairly durable alliance with the *darogahs*. But the immediate reaction of a good many of them was very different. Apart from the loss of power and prestige, the new tax threatened to undercut the profits which many of them derived from enhanced *ghar jama*, *chundinali* and similar other levies. Saran provides an interesting—though by no means an exceptional—example.⁷⁴ Chapra and its neighbourhood was the residence of principal merchants and *shroffs* in the district. In one instance, which occurred in Doulatganj, near Chapra, an old man died in the *bazar*. There was at once a clamour which bordered on frenzy. A multitude of shopkeepers assembled, brought the body to Chapra and asserted that he was beaten to death by the *Amin* for his alleged refusal to pay the tax. Four witnesses came forward to pin the charge on the *amin*. One of them subsequently retracted his evidence, admitting that he had been sent by one Juggernaut Sing, the *gomasta* of the proprietor of Doulatganj. While the corpse was thus stirring up the wrath of the *bazar*, the collector believed, not without reason, that 'the opposition has been encouraged if not promoted by the landholders in general.' He however admitted, almost in the same breath, that 'the opposition made to the tax has been universal.'

Such instances come in abundance. Likewise, the wealthy traders of some regions chose to highlight the plight of the merchants. In 24 Parganas, which witnessed a spirited refusal to pay the tax, the lead was taken by the principal traders of Tollyganj and Chitpur, the two most important areas of mercantile concentration in the district.⁷⁵ The collector summoned some wealthy traders who were most determined not to pay the tax, and asked them whether they had any objection to make against the rates. 'They had no objection,' tells the collector, 'to make against the list. But their objection, they said, was against the tax itself.' This seemed to be the general opinion

In a desperate bid, the collector now decided to appeal, over their heads, to the general body of merchants in the two *bazars*. He summoned the whole of the Tollyganj and Chitpur merchants to his presence. They however, had nothing fresh to add. The collector finally drew his conclusion: 'Their refusal does not proceed from inability, but a resolution formed among themselves not to do it.' J. H. Harrington, the Commissioner of Rajshahi reported that of all the traders in the districts, those at Natore were found out to be the most obdurate. They were chiefly 'the agents of the merchants of Moorshedabad and other places.'⁷⁶ The experience of the collector of Dacca was roughly similar. He also found that the refusal of the principal traders to pay the tax was followed up immediately by that of the inferior ones.⁷⁷ Such instances need not be multiplied.

The aggregative impact of all this was too obvious to be missed by the government. The Governor General in Council, in its statement to the court of Directors, was constrained to admit that in course of the first year of its operation (i.e., upto 30.4.94), the excess of expenditure over receipt was to the extent of Rs. 1,89,095-5-14-2. However, it was still nurturing the hope 'that there will be little or no deficiency in the current and ensuing years.'⁷⁸ But objectively there was very little reason to sustain the hope. In 1795-96 the excess of expense over receipt was Rs. 2,23,057. The Governor General's optimism was suitably tailored this time. He admitted that although at present the government was incurring an extraordinary expense, this was of small concern, compared with the extensive advantages arising from the establishment of an efficient system of police.⁷⁹ The palliatives which the Board of Revenue suggested from time to time, and the Governor General had agreed to, could not, in any significant way, reduce the yawning gap between the *jama* and *hasil*. Finally, in its letter to the court dated 31 August 1797, there came a fulsome admission of the failure. Precocious expectations had now given way to a realistic assessment of the record. The Governor General enumerated the many difficulties that came his way: 'From the very prejudicial operation of that tax, owing to the impossibility of assessing it equitably, and to the great abuses practised in the collection of it, especially among the lower orders of the people, we consider the abolition of it to have been a measure of indispensable necessity.'⁸⁰

Why was the Police Tax withdrawn? At a very general level it can plausibly be argued that the steadfast refusal on

the part of a large number of assesses to comply with its provisions led the Government to a cul de sac. Nowhere was this more clearly reflected than in the figures of collection. Making the administration pay for itself was a sound business proposition if only the receipts could be ensured. In practice, the many 'difficulties' that the government had increasingly confronted in course of its implementation clearly revealed that what the officials described as 'perverseness of the traders' was certainly a factor to reckon with.

But this, I submit, is not the whole explanation. To explain its withdrawal simply in terms of its unpopularity is to credit the company with a tender receptivity to popular feelings which can easily be disproved by numerous instances drawn from other areas of historical experience. In plain terms, therefore, one needs to look for other variables as well. The first of these, it seems, was the insufficiency of the usual methods of coercion. The Regulation, as we have seen, specified a set of *pénalties* for non-compliance with its provisions. These were either to take the defaulters into confinement or to distrain their property. Notwithstanding their proved effectiveness in other spheres, both the methods were found insufficient to coerce the defaulting into obedience. The explanation probably lies in the specific nature of mercantile protest. Suspension of business, threat of withdrawal of capital, *hartal*, and in the last resort, desertion, were the methods which largely blunted the edges of the coercive instruments at the disposal of the government.

As I have already emphasized, these were the characteristic forms of traders' protest elsewhere in India as well. The Shahabad Collector's statement that traders refused to sell even daily necessities in protest against the police tax found a mirror image in the burgher's protest at Benares (1810-11) where the merchants closed their shops, businessmen suspended their activities, and every manner of work and occupation was suspended. Likewise, at Bareilly, (1816), during the initial stages, the 'business stood still, the shops were shut and multitudes assembled near the Magistrate's office to petition for the abolition of the (Police) tax' (Mill, VIII, 87). Further, during the Civil Disobedience Movement (1932), according to Purshotamdas Thakurdas, 'the continuous Hartals being observed in various markets and the subsuspension of business activities completely dislocated business and brought about a paralysis of the economic structure.'⁸¹ In most such cases, the agitations were moderately successful. The Police Tax

in Bengal, like the House Tax in Benares, were withdrawn. There was no question of withdrawing the Police Tax of Bareilly because, as Bayly has shown, this was soon submerged by the general threat posed by the Rohilla revolt.⁸²

Which, in fact, leads me to the second point. Once the usual methods of coercion failed to 'discipline' the 'perverse' traders, there was a studied reluctance on the part of the District officers to take recourse to other means. The weight of evidence clearly indicates that while putting up a show of intense activity, they generally refrained from pushing the traders too far. They knew, as Harrington of Rajeshahy explains, that to punish the disobedience by preventing a continuance of their sales was to result in a backlash that was likely to produce greater harm.⁸³ Not a few of them unequivocally expressed their disapproval of it as a fiscal measure. The Board of Revenue, as we know, consisted of men who had served their earlier rounds in the districts. Although it initially advocated firmness in dealing with protest, it ultimately came round to the views of the collectors and recommended the withdrawal of the tax. The Governor General and Council agreed with the recommendation and forwarded it to the Court for approval. A specific grievance could be rectified locally without disturbing the general structure of administration or undermining the authority of the Company Bahadur. The predominantly non-violent economic protest of Bengal traders, like their Benares counterparts, could therefore be taken care of. But not the protest of the traders at Bareilly. There the general commotion that ensued, pushed the question of the tax to the periphery. It was left to the military to control the insurgency of the Rohillas. The traders of Bengal or Benares did not deprive the administration of its options that way.

Thus, the Police Tax died a premature death, but not before it delivered an adequate substitute. In fact 1797 witnessed the withdrawal of the Police Tax and the simultaneous substitution of stamp duties. The post-Permanent Settlement litigiousness had opened up before the Government the opportunity it was desperately looking for. This could provide the government the necessary scope for withdrawing the Police Tax without suffering any loss. 'We were unwilling to relinquish a branch of public revenue without previously providing some other adequate resource,' said the Governor General.⁸⁴ This time, however, hopes were not belied. In less than a year after its introduction, the Stamp Duty yielded about two lakhs

of rupees.⁸⁵ Salad days were lying ahead. It was not far off when according to *Samachar Darpan*, 'for the Zemindars a lawsuit in the Supreme Court was esteemed a token of respectability and when to say that a man had two or three cases in equity gave him as great distinction as to say that he had spent 20,000 at the Doorga Pooja.'

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12. Circular issued by the Governor General in Council (hereafter G.G. in C.) dated 7.12.1792. Board of Revenue (Police), (hereafter B.O.R. (P.)), Vol. 1.
13. Ibid.
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15. John Rosselli, *Lord William Bentinck : The Making of a Liberal Imperialist, 1774-1839*, Sussex, 1974, p. 201.
16. B.O.R. (P.), Vol. 1.
17. Judicial Criminal Proceedings (Hereafter J. (cr.) P), 14 Feb. 1794.
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20. Thus, in his Patna Gaya Journal Buchanan writes, 'I went between ten and eleven miles, called four coses, by a most villainous and circuitous route to Islamnagar. The only object of the guides seemed to be to keep us at a distance from the villages.' Journal ... of Patna and Gaya, pp. 78-79, 26 Dec. 1811. Likewise, in the entry for 10 Dec. 1810 he says, 'The natives seem to be uncommonly shy, as men from every village were sent out to lead me round, in order to avoid my seeing their houses.' For further instances of a similar nature see Marika Vicziany. 'The Deindustrialization of India in the Nineteenth Century : A Methodological Critique of Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *I.E.S.H.R.* Vol. XVI, No. 2, pp. 11-114.
21. C. Keating to G. G. in C, dt. 15.1.1793, B.O.R. (P), Vol. 1.
22. S. Bayard to G. G. in C, dt. 15.1.1793, B.O.R. (P), Vol. 1.
23. B.O.R. (P), Vol. 1.
24. J (cr.) P., 18 Oct. 1793.
25. E. Colebrooke to G. G. in C, dt. 1 July 1793, B.O.R.(P), Vol. 1.
26. J (cr.) P, 18 Oct., 1793.
27. J (cr.) P. 21 June, 1793.
28. Judl. Consn. 5 April, 1793, reproduced in B.O.R.(P), Vol. 1.
29. Original Consultation (hereafter O. C.), B.O.R.(P), 6 June, 1794.
30. Judl. Consn. 29 March, 1793, reproduced in B.O.R.(P), Vol. 2.
31. Judl. Consn. 5 April, 1793, reproduced in B.O.R.(P), Vol. 2.
32. At this point it is necessary to distinguish between the three different levels of rural markets as they appear in the following narrative. The ubiquitous hat or village fair invariably constituted the base level of the market structure of Bengal. These hats were held weekly or bi-weekly 'in the open air' where 'no resident shopkeeper is to be found' (J. (cr) P. 18.10.93). In districts such as Chittagong the hat was the locus of simple

peasant marketing—a place where a peasant sold his product directly to the consumer. But in several other areas some hats were of considerable commercial importance, frequented by petty consumers and middlemen alike. At the level above there were the regular markets (bazars) where there were permanent establishments of shopkeepers (dukandars). These shopkeepers generally paid ground-rent (variously known as chundinah or ghur-jumma) to their respective Zamindars. An old and well-established market contained numerous categories of merchants ranging from mahajans or bankers to petty prostitutes (khankees) (see especially the enumeration prepared by B. Crisp, the Magistrate of Dacca, B.O.R.(P), Vol. 1). At a still higher level stood ganj (market) where like in Islamabad in Chittagong, there were warehouses (golahs) maintained by golahdars or wholesale dealers. These golahdars frequently sent their agents (gomashtas) in the interior who made either ready money purchases or provided advance to the primary producers.

33. B.O.R.(P), Vol. 2.
34. Quoted in Colin M. Fisher, 'Planters and Peasants' in C. Dewey and A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *The Imperial Impact: Studies in Economic History of Africa and India*, London 1978, p. 123.
35. B.O.R.(P), 28 April 1795.
36. J (Cr.) P, 31 May 1793.
37. O.C., B.O.R. (P), 1 Feb., 1795.
38. Judl. Consn., reproduced in B.O.R. (P), Vol. 3.
39. O.C., B.O.R.(P), 8 Sep. 1795.
40. J (Cr) P, 24 Jan. 1794.
41. J (Cr) P, 18 Oct. 1793.
42. The following is an explanation of the terms as given by the Collector of Tipperah. Goladars: 'Merchants carrying on an extensive trade in grain, salt, cotton and a variety of other articles who are wholesale dealers; Beparis: 'Merchants who purchase from the goladars and export their merchandise to different parts but whose commercial transactions are not of so extensive a nature as those of the goladars; Capooriahs: 'Cloth merchants of every denomination both wholesale and retail who have regular established shops in the different bazars and ganjes; Podars: coin-changers and bankers; Mudies: 'retailers of grain of all kinds; Dokandars: 'Inferior retailers ... having small shops in different bazars, ganjes and villages'; Khoordean Bauzey Benaries: petty retailers and hawkers. O.C., B.O.R.(P), 8 Sept. 1795.
43. J (cr) P, 25 April, 1794.
44. J (cr) P, 18 October, 1793.
45. O.C., B.O.R.(P), 4 June, 1796.
46. O.C., B.O.R.(P), 21 Sept., 1795.
47. Ibid.

48. O.C., B.O.R.(P), 21 Oct., 1795.
49. O.C., B.O.R.(P), 8 Sept., 1795.
50. R. Guha and A. Mitra (ed.), *West Bengal District Records (New Series), Burdwan, Letters Issued, 1788-1800*, Calcutta, 1956, p. 89.
51. Ibid., p. 110.
52. O.C., B.O.R.(P), 7 Nov., 1795.
53. J (Cr) P, 12 July, 1793.
54. B.O.R.(P), 15 April, 1796.
55. B.O.R.(P), 28 April, 1795.
56. B.O.R.(P), 19 Feb., 1796.
57. B.O.R.(P), 28 April, 1795.
58. J (Cr) P, 12 July, 1793.
59. B.O.R.(P), 19 Feb., 1796.
60. J. (Cr) P, 7 March, 1794.
61. Basudeb Chattopadhyay, 'The Initial Impact of the Introduction of the English Law in Bengal' in *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, Vol. V, No. 2, January-June, 1981, pp. 29-46. That the situation was no different in 1796 is amply corroborated by the testimony of J. Stonehouse, the Collector of Midnapur: 'Of this privilege, (i.e., recourse to the adawlut—B.C.) however, few who may be aggrieved will be found to avail themselves. They chuse (sic) rather to pay the amount quietly than undergo the Trouble and vexation consequent on a judicial investigation.' B.O.R.(P), 8 March, 1796.
62. Only a few petitions have survived. For a typical example see Judl. Consn., 5 April, 1793 reproduced in B.O.R.(P), Vol. 2.
63. Judl. Consn., 5 April, 1793, reproduced in B.O.R.(P), Vol. 2
64. B.O.R.(P), 28 April, 1795.
65. B.O.R.(P), 19 Feb., 1796.
66. J (cr) P, 9 Aug., 1793.
67. B.O.R.(P), 15 April, 1796.
68. B.O.R.(P), 9 Sept. 1795; also J (cr) P, 21 June, 1793.
69. J (cr) P, 31 May, 1793.
70. Judl. Consn., 5 April 1793, reproduced in B.O.R.(P), Vol. 2.
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72. G. Dickinson, Colbr., to B.O.R., letter dated 29 Feb., 1796, B.O.R.(P), April 15, 1796.
73. J (cr) P, 11 Oct., 1793.
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76. J (cr) P, 28 June, 1793.
77. B.O.R.(P), 19 Feb., 1796.
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81. A.D.D. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 218.
 82. For a perceptive discussion on the uprising of the Rohillas, see C. A. Bayly, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
 83. J (cr) P, 28 June, 1793.
 84. G.L.C.D., Revenue Dept., 31 August, 1797. It may be of interest to note that the proposal to introduce the Stamp Duties was defended by the Governor General on the ground that it would 'discourage the institution of the many vexations and litigious suits, which are still brought before the courts, from the facility with which individuals can have access to them.' (Ibid).
- The ethical considerations were very nearly invalidated by the following statement: 'We are not without hope that this tax so modified and improved may produce a sum equal to the former Police Tax.' G.L.C.D., Revenue Dept., 5 March, 1800.
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2

THREE CASES OF RURAL PROTEST IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY SOUTH INDIA

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Much has been written on the popular rural protest in colonial India, and recently the forceful though not fully developed arguments of an 'emerging' school of historical thought¹ have provoked a wide-ranging controversy on the nature, spontaneity, target, organization and other elementary aspects of such protests. It is now well-known that much of the analysis of the said historical school is done in the context of a relationship of dominance and subordination, a relationship which inevitably speaks of the autonomous nature of the politics of people independent of what has been described as elite politics both in origin and in operations. It is further argued that it is possible to demarcate the domain of subaltern politics from that of elite politics because of the non-integration of the life and experiences of the people with the elitist hegemony. "The authority of the colonial state, far from being neutral to this relationship, was indeed one of its constitutive elements" in favour of the elites.² It is obvious that one major focus of the protest movements, according to this model, is on landlordism, a target which is so inextricably linked with moneyland and the oppressive arm of the colonial government that a movement might include attacks against all these at any given moment of time. Unfortunately, this model cannot exhaust all the meanings of protest in colonial India. More particularly, this does not take into account the predominantly anti-colonial, landlord-dominated but not essentially elitist, and sometimes even popular protests in India. The present paper is an attempt to highlight some of the features of the protest of the landlords, especially the mirasiders, in South India in the early nineteenth century and to show that such protests had enormous complexities which cannot be explained either by elitist or subaltern nomenclature.

The choice of the mirasidars on protest is significant. The very word mirasi is associated with a sort of privilege in land-ownership. In most modern south Indian histories, the term mirasidar has been generally explained as a wide, almost undifferentiated mass of privileged landholders, with far-flung rights and control over land and its product. This has happened mainly because of the heavy dependence on Ellis's able memoir on *Mirasi Right* which was printed by the Madras Government in 1818, and which focussed and then upheld the rights and privileges of the mirasidars in their pristine purity, without discussing their actual operative context.³ Of the modern historians who have taken up the question of the mirasidar in the operative context, Professor Burton Stein is a notable example. In one of his seminal articles a few years ago, Stein discussed the broad developments within the agrarian structure of south India from the ninth to nineteenth centuries, and detected some integration of interests between the major landholding class and the state at several points of time, the last of which he said happened in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁴ Since by the major landholding class Stein meant the mirasidars of the wet land areas, the last integration can fairly be taken as one between them and the Company's Raj, the then colonial government. Here integration seemed to Stein a basic harmony, the co-operation with and accommodation to British usage by the mirasidars. The thesis (at least as it is stated in the article mentioned), however, is simplistic. First, it does not give due weightage to the interaction of government and rural actors in the primarily wet areas of Tamilnadu, which involved a more complex praxis. Secondly, it does not differentiate the various groups commonly known as mirasidars, nor does it examine their operative implications. Indeed, the integration theme seems to lack clarity and does not absorb the full meaning of the functions of the mirasidars in the early nineteenth century.

In this paper, I shall discuss the mirasi protest against some revenue measures of the government in the second quarter of the nineteenth century in three of the mirasi dominated, considerably wet districts of Tamilnadu—Tinneveli, Tanjore and South Arcot. Much of the protest, however is to be seen in the context of mirasi activities relating to the ownership and control of land. The scope of the mirasi activities in Tamil agrarian society was very wide and there were different phases of development. As Stein has pointed out elsewhere, a few of the mirasidars were also yajamanas in the full cultural sense

of the term with important ritual and symbolic functions as well as economic ones.⁵ Nevertheless, as important actors in the nineteenth century rural society, the mirasidars of Tamilnadu throughout possessed a dual character : they faced the state and its demands on the one hand, and tried to maintain their superordinate positions in relation to a number of lower peasant categories on the other. At a basic level, the mirasi protest was inevitable because of the generally heavy demand of the state,⁶ but as we shall see it was guided by a number of other factors as well. Before that, however, some knowledge of land tenural history and a brief understanding of the stratification within the agrarian society in these districts are necessary.

Judged by its initially professed principle, the ryotwari system in Madras was a settlement made by the government with the ryots or cultivators to the exclusion of all intermediaries. However, there is reason to believe that the principle of ignoring all intermediary rights was never acted upon in full, even in the early ryotwari (1792-1807) and the lease (1808-1814) systems. It was definitely revised prior to the introduction of the revised ryotwari system in the 1820s. As early as 1817, the government decided that ryotwari settlement should not in any way trench on the rights of the mirasidars and others in the soil. It, however, did not preclude a settlement with the actual occupiers of land.⁷

What, then, were the rights of the mirasidars? Essentially, mirasi was a privileged right to the possession of land, carrying with it heritable, almost exclusive right of sale and purchase. There were differences of opinion regarding its origin, though it was agreed that it originated from some form of favourable tenure. The main features of the privilege were as follows.⁸ First, it was independent of revenue-paying liability for the lands concerned; the government could only temporarily give these to others for cultivation in the absence of mirasidars. Secondly, since the mirasi right did not lapse even when the land concerned remained uncultivated, it was widely believed that the mirasi right extended to the waste lands, subject only to the nature of the waste. Thirdly, the mirasi right was superior to all other tenural rights. As a result, both the *ulkudi* (resident cultivating) and *parakudi* (non-resident cultivating) tenures were said to be subordinate tenures under the mirasi. As landlord's right everywhere, the mirasidar used to get *tunduvaram* (a certain portion of *kudivaram* or cultivator's share of the produce) and *swamibhogam* (the

rent paid for the land held in farm) from all lands cultivated by *payakaris* or persons not mirasidars.

The mirasi rights were generally seen in the wet areas ; therefore, they were present in considerable portions of Tanjore, Tinneveli and South Arcot. However, these rights could be broadly grouped under three zonal types on the basis of their nature in general. The first type, with mostly strong and secure rights, could be found in the Kaveri deltaic area of Tanjore and the Tambraparni riverine zone of Tinneveli. Here the mirasidars were the pattadars, the official revenue-payers, and were cultivating through tenant and/or attached labour. One indication of the strength of the mirasidars of these areas was the ease with which their ownership claims were realised. This means that they were mostly the pattadars, that their ownership rights were rarely questioned, through litigation or otherwise, and that the violation of the *swamibhogam* payment was relatively infrequent. Here the villages were *panguvali*, where the mirasidar had the full right to transfer their land.⁹ The second type of mirasidars were those whose rights were only partly accepted, and even occasionally challenged. This group was found in South Arcot and in some other districts. Here pattas were frequently issued in the names of *payakaris* or non-mirasidars, and the legality of the mirasi proprietorship was questioned in judicial courts. Practically speaking, the alleged mirasi right over waste land in these districts turned out to be an issue on which confrontation in the court and outside became imminent. Finally, there were mirasidars in all marginally wet areas of all the districts. Their rights were most vulnerable and doubtful.¹⁰

What was the nature of agrarian stratification in these mirasi areas ? First of all, I shall explain the nature of strongest agricultural control. The big mirasidars had a virtual monopoly in landownership, and cultivated entirely either through *pallan*, the bonded labour, or through *parakudis*, their undertenants. The cultivation of land was carried on under three different systems. The first system was called *pannai* system, under which the mirasidar himself cultivated his land with the assistance of *pannaiyals* or farm labourers who were paid daily wages. Many mirasidars also cultivated through their own *pallans*. Practically, the whole work of grain cultivation was done by the men and women of the *pallans*, if the mirasidar was a Brahmin. "A truant *pallan* could be returned to his master by force and, except by agreement between the two landlord communities, could not change the village of his alliance

and could find no other work".¹¹ Secondly, there was the *varam* or sharing system. Under it, the mirasidar and the *parakudi* were jointly concerned in the cultivation of the land belonging to the former, and the share of the latter was called *parakudi varam*. The *parakudi* had to put forth his personal labour in the cultivation of his mirasidar's land and pay all charges connected therewith. The mirasidar, as a rule, contrived to keep his *parakudi* indebted to him for advances of money or seed and thus had a perpetual hold on him. He even claimed the site of the *parakudi's* hut as his own.¹² The third system of cultivation was the lease system adopted by non-resident mirasidars who shared none of the risks of cultivation and, in consequence, got only a stipulated quantity of grain out of the total produce of their lands.

In Tanjore, the domination of the big mirasidars was most marked. The domination was such that it continued even after the sequestration of the lands of the mirasidars in case of default, for their influence remained even when the land was under the superintendence of a *monigar* (official supervisor).¹³ The cultivation was carried on "by the same inhabitants, the mirasidar's slaves and servants, the mirasidar possesses the same influence in the village".¹⁴ Moreover, there was a certain kind of domination by the larger mirasidars over the lesser ones, the result being that the former often paid a revenue which was lower than the assessed revenue on the land.¹⁵ The balance was obviously collected from the lesser mirasidars of the villages. This was evident from a particular case in the village called Korasapolam in the district, in which the lesser mirasidars offered Rs. 1000 more than the original revenue of the village, the excess presumably being already paid in other forms.¹⁶

In Tinneveli, in those areas where the strong mirasi right existed the situation was not basically different. The rate of *swamibhogam* was high even in Nadumandalam, which was not a very secure wet taluk,¹⁷ and the use of *pallan* labour widely prevailed. The powerful mirasidars got possession of the best land, and collected from the inferior ryots an average *tirwa* (land revenue), irrespective of the soil conditions (*taram*) of the particular lands.¹⁸

By contrast, in areas where mirasi right was less strong or even weak, agricultural control by the mirasidars was comparatively limited. First of all, the existence of a large number of landowners other than the mirasidars was a constant source of tension. These non-mirasi landowners were actually diffe-

rent subordinate tenure-holders who cultivated land and paid revenue to the government in return. Their right to land was recognized by the government when they were given pattas. There were conflicts, in courts and outside, between the claims of these patta-holders and mirasidars. This situation prevailed largely in South Arcot, and partly in portions of Tinnevely. Secondly, the use of *pallan* labour was less in these areas. Thirdly, there was a growing eagerness among the *parakudis* to get pattas so as to free themselves from the mirasi control. This freedom was not merely formal ; it was actually exercised to a large extent, the evidence of which was the innumerable court cases. Finally, there was a large number of small and middle mirasidars in South Arcot and parts of Tinneveli, who were engaged in agriculture more directly, with their own supervision and resources utilized. Even some form of direct labour cannot be ruled out in certain cases.

II

With this background of land tenural history and agrarian relations, I shall now turn to the central theme of this paper—the mirasi protest against colonial government. The principal source of antagonisms between the landowners and the state was the revenue policy of the government ; and both these antagonisms and the revenue policy had diverse forms. This relationship would be studied with particular reference to three cases of protest in Tinneveli, Tanjore and South Arcot.

The opposition of the mirasidars of Tinneveli was over the issue of the introduction of money assessment associated with the land revenue system called *olungu*, replacing the prevailing system known as *amani*.

Amani literally meant division of crops between the government and the mirasidars under the control of the former.¹⁹ The system which was a carry-over from former days, took a distinct shape under the British during the period 1801-1808, after which it was officially criticised and its practice discouraged. Roughly speaking, its main features were first an estimation by officials of the government of the gross produce of each village late in the paddy season and then the division between *melvaram* (government's share) and *kudivaram* (mirasidar's share) at fixed rates. Here the government's main concern was for a division between itself and the mirasidars as a whole, leaving the latter practically free for a division among themselves. The

whole of the government's share of *Kar* or the first crop was retained until January-March, when along with the three-fifths of its share of *peshanam* or the second crop, the stock was disposed of to some leading mirasidars.²⁰ The rest of the stock the government sold in the lean season after May-June, when most of the grains at the disposal of the mirasidars were either consumed or sold out and there was a great demand for grain. Through its control over the grain trade, the government thus tried to keep the prices up and profit by price changes. The few mirasidars who were involved in the grain market in the *amani* system were those large mirasiders who could profit from the government-supported prices as well as those who were actually agents of the government in the marketing network, and these roles were often united. The *amani* system thus gave the mirasidars safety from seasonal fluctuations; it made the subdivision of their shares largely an affair among themselves; and it involved a role of some of them in the paddy market, though the rest were not fully unaffected by market fluctuations.

The *olungu* system on the other hand was a compromise reached in 1819-20 between the government's keenness on a change-over to money rent and the mirasidar's insistence on the continuance of the *amani* system. The government could not force the acceptance of the system because of the real problems occurring in the last ten years or so. This was the period of the lease system of revenue collection when prices fell considerably. At the time of the introduction of the revised ryotwari system in the early 1820s, the government insisted on a money assessment again, but the mirasidar feared that he might suffer a loss. There was some initial opposition;²¹ and the *olungu* was proposed as a solution.

The *olungu* in practice was a system under which the demand would change with the movement of prices, but the latter should rise 10 per cent above or fall 5 per cent below the standard prices (average of prices of certain specified years) fixed earlier for making any corresponding change in the money rent. On the face of it, therefore, the system offered the bulk of the mirasidars a good opportunity to participate in marketing with less risk of loss.

What may, however, seem very strange was the hostility of a considerable group of mirasidars in various parts of Tinneveli against the new system of the *olungu* assessment. When the government went to introduce the new system, it still maintained the option of the *amani* if the mirasidar did not consent, but the *olungu* was always preferred by it.²² Huddleston, the

collector, noted opposition in various parts,²³ and reported that he had to settle with 96 villages in Sherniadevi, a principal taluk in Tinneveli, for a period of five years at the insistence of the mirasidars.²⁴ Within a short period, about two-thirds of the villages which were held on money rents during the decennial lease period accepted the *olungu*, but the rest continued the resistance.²⁵ Throughout the 1820s the *jamabandi* reports show a considerable number of *amani* villages in Tinneveli, and the decrease was visible only in the early 1830s (for example, there were 272 *amani* villages in the district in 1827-28, which declined to 43 in 1833-34). What was the root of their resistance?

It has something to do with the physical conditions of agrarian production in Tinneveli. On the basis of distribution of resources and cropping possibilities, two broad divisions could be identified: the Tambraparni riverine areas with great security of irrigation on the one hand, and the rest of the district with less security on the other. This means that both on the questions of production and prices, the experience of these two groups of areas was largely different. While a more or less stable production level was ensured in the riverine areas because of their relative independence of seasons, output in the rest of the district depended more or less on rainfall. And profits or loss from the rise and fall of market prices varied with the stability or instability of agriculture.

As the standard grain amount, the basic for the *olungu*, was fixed, and fluctuations in the output were not properly considered, the mirasidars of the less secure and insecure areas feared a real loss from the new system. The result was that the mirasidars of these areas opposed any attempt of the government at converting the *amani* into the *olungu*, and the number of *amani* villages remained high in these areas: Alwar Tirunagari, Srivaikundam, Kalakkad, Panchmahl and Sankarayanayarkoil. Here the seasonal rise of prices was scarcely enough to compensate for the mirasidar's loss from the shortfalls in the production. The *amani* seems not to have been a preference, but a necessity for a number of villages in these areas.

By contrast, the mirasidars of the secure areas, who participated in the marketing network, preferred the *amani* in anticipation of a probable rise in prices. Immediately after the introduction of the *olungu*, prices seem to have risen slightly in Tinneveli. The mirasidars could choose between the *olungu* and the *amani*. When marketing was profitable these mirasidars clung to the *amani*; when loss was feared, they readily

chose the *olungu*. However, there is no doubt that for the bulk of the small and middle mirasidars even in the secure areas, *olungu* could be an opening for marketing action with less risk of loss, but prices were not still remunerating enough to inspire them.

Finally, the stratification among the mirasidars can also explain the difference in their response. The domination of the substantial mirasidars over the lesser ones was an important issue in Tinneveli, especially in the riverine areas: the collector of Tinneveli in 1826 found innumerable cases of petty mirasidars, who even though styled *mahajanams* (hereditary Brahmin mirasidars), were extremely poor, holding less than an acre of land,²⁶ and also noted the overall control of the superior mirasidars over the inferior ones.²⁷ Indeed, the *amani* system which largely left the distribution of crops among the mirasidars to themselves, provided a means of exercising such control, and the lesser landholders had to part with a greater share of produce as land revenue demand than they were supposed to do for their respective holding.²⁸ The *olungu* system with its insistence on the issue of pattas providing for individual payments of the revenue demand was therefore greatly opposed by the strong mirasidars, and in the taluk of Shermadevi—a very secure agricultural area—some mirasidars even after consenting to the *olungu* left room for arrangements among themselves and put up resistance when the collector tried to distribute pattas after three years.²⁹ The duration of the resistance depended on the strength of the parties. For example, the village of Shermadevi itself in the same taluk clung to the *amani* as late as 1834; and the sub-collector reporting on a petition of the mirasidars of the village asking for a change-over to the *amani* wondered why they were incurring an apparent loss in spite of the fact that the actual produce—the base for the *amani*—was higher than what would be the standard produce of the village in the *olungu*.³⁰ He further noted that over 65 per cent of the pattadars of the village holding about 45 per cent of land actually did consent to the *olungu* after his arrival there, and he hoped that the rest would follow suit within a short time.³¹

The opposition to the *olungu* gradually started to disappear after the early 1830s, and by 1837 the district was fully converted to the new system. There were a number of factors leading to this change of attitude. First of all, the high seasonal prices following a number of bad harvests between 1832 and 1834 led the mirasidars to gain from the high market

prices. In the three years (1832-1834), the average prices of the dry crops in the districts rose considerably but the paddy was not completely unaffected. Especially the price of paddy rose sharply in those areas where the dry crops were the main food of the people but were scarce during these years : the substantial mirasidars of the secure tract participating in the marketing of paddy utilised the great spatial variation of prices to their advantage.³² Secondly, the government took an adamant attitude and decided that they would allow no reversion to the *amani* once the conversion to the *olungu* was made. Thirdly, as for the mirasidars of the insecure tracts where the rise of price could not compensate the shortage of the production of paddy, there were remissions of the state demand and the scope for *nanjai-mel-punjai* (dry crop on wet land) cultivation primarily by well irrigation along with the usual profits from high prices. Indeed, with the experience of the fall in the prices between 1825 and 1832, the mirasidars of Tinneveli could realise the *short-term* nature of profits and therefore could not appreciate the suitability of the *olungu* system. It seems the mirasidars of the district made the right decision : the *olungu* mitigated their hardships partly when the prices fell greatly in the early 1840s.

III

The opposition of the mirasidars of Tanjore district was similar to that in Tinneveli in one point. It was the vexed question of the continued preference for the *amani* system, with all its frauds and defects, in several parts of the district. But whereas in Tinneveli the opposition was just a refusal to accept the *olungu* system, in Tanjore it was further connected with an opposition to a survey and settlement of the land. Moreover, the more substantial mirasidars of parts of Tanjore challenged and resisted the government with a greater strength. These mirasidars were all magnates.

Two cases of opposition in the district would be reviewed here : one from the deltaic part and the other from the non-deltaic. The particular case of the deltaic part happened in the taluk of Shivali³³ in the late 1820s when the collector wanted to introduce the new money rent in place of the *amani* system on the basis of a detailed survey work. Aware of the gross defects of the *amani* system and the governmental preference, A.D. Campbell—the collector of Tanjore—started a field assess-

ment in Shivali in 1827, and was immediately faced with innumerable difficulties. Early in 1828, he submitted to the Board of Revenue, Madras a detailed report of the forms of resistance.³⁴

The most formidable of the obstacles created by the mirasidars was an attempt to destroy the crop in order to prevent any kind of assessment of the actual produce of the land. The *karnam* (accountant) of a large village called Chittanandapuram in Shivali reported on 11 December, 1827 that the mirasidars of the village had executed a contract among themselves that none should reap the crop and consequently the ripened *kar* crop remained uncut and damaged day by day. The collector also saw crops rotting on the ground. Secondly, the collector got a report from Mr. Nay, a "highly respectable" Englishman who had indigo works in Tanjore, that the mirasidars had issued orders to the *parakudis* prohibiting the cultivation in the present year of the usual portion of dry grains and indigo in order to prevent any valuation. Thirdly, the *tahsildar* (taluk official) of Shivali reported on December 22, 1827 that the great mirasidars and their followers, after making several attempts at neglecting the cultivation and diminishing the produce even sought to destroy the whole of the *sumba peshanam*, the second and the major crop in Tanjore, by mainly declining to do a repair of a breach in the great dam, which supplied water in the taluk. The collector instantly proceeded to the spot, found the breach and repaired it. Some of the chief mirasidars also left the taluk, in order not to assist any assessment work in any form. Finally, the collector found some linkage between the big mirasidars of Shivali with those of Kumbakonam, Papanasam, Nunniam etc., and suspected that the latter had influenced the former against consenting to any assessment, anticipating that any increase involved in it would expose at once the inadequacy of the former rates and the corruption by which it was lowered. He called it a combination of the resistance of the mirasidars of Tanjore, and finally added that they were attempting to create legal hindrances, through their agent Vinkoba or Vinkata Rao in Madras, implicating him in a number of cases including one of murder.

Several things are clear from this story of resistance. First of all, the substantial mirasidars with their wider control of resources and holdings could well challenge the government in order to maintain their own interests which were in direct opposition to those below them—the undertenants. For no harvest meant no *varam* for the *parakudis*, and deliberate damage of

the crops inevitably diminished their share. There was discontent among the *parakudis*, and the collector said that he was "surrounded by crowds of *parakudis*" complaining over the issue.³⁵ Secondly, the resistance shows that even in Shivali the mirasi group should not be taken as a homogenous category. In the midst of opposition, the collector was able to reach an agreement with 202 inferior villages or hamlets, the mirasidars of which agreed to reap the *kar* crop, but 110 principal villages held by a few magnate mirasidars remained adamant over the issue.³⁶ Thirdly, the principal mirasidars of Tanjore had an informal organization and connected with higher authorities. This was evident from their frequent association with a number of important revenue officials (the type which Professor Frykenberg calls local control³⁷), the subtleties of their litigation attempts and also from the occasional concern which even the Board of Revenue showed for them. In the Shivali case, the Board seems to have been clearly predisposed to the substantial mirasidars; in its late proceedings on Campbell's report about the resistance, the Board suggested a policy of non-interference with the activities of the mirasidars, arguing against enforcement of the full right of the government.³⁸ Indeed, the Board took up only one side of the whole question, and interpreted the opposition as being not against the field assessment itself, but against its premature application.

By contrast, the opposition in the non-deltaic part, particularly in the dry upland of Puttukottai, could never become as big an issue as that of the magnates of the delta.³⁹ Here also, there was a continued preference for the *amani* among the landholders, much against the government's own desire to introduce the ryotwari system preceded by a Survey. The reason behind this preference was same as in the insecure zones of Tinneveli: a high grain standard with fluctuating production and less remunerating prices forced the mirasidars of Puttukottai to opt for the *amani*.⁴⁰ It could be argued that the grain standard was high not only because of the fact that seasonal fluctuations of production were not properly considered, but to an extent also because of the incapacity of the many landholders for offering sufficient bribes to many government servants.⁴¹ It was a vicious process—bribe followed by bribe, from the grain estimator down to the superintendent of harvest.

A survey was, however, conducted in Puttukottai and the report was ready by the middle of 1830⁴² The survey brought to light unrecorded land, as a result of which an increase of 22 per cent occurred in the total extent of land. There was even

some increase in the survey assessment (about 6 per cent) over the previous *olungu* rate.

There was little actual opposition : 160 villages went over to the *olungu*, with 44 still remaining under the *amani*. Such resistance bore little resemblance to the organised resistance in the delta : Puttukottai was not Shivali. The case of the magnates in the delta remained unique in Tanjore.

IV

In South Arcot, the opposition of the mirasidars was distinct from that of either Tanjore or Tinneveli with respect to the very issues that led to it. Two administrative measures lay behind it, which were resisted much more actively than elsewhere, leading even to some general disturbances in the district. The timing was also different : it took place in the early 1840s, almost a decade later than the cases in Tanjore or Tinneveli.

In two other ways, the South Arcot case differs from that of Tanjore and Tinneveli. First, the district does not present any sharp differences in the physical conditions of agrarian production to the extent that the other two do. Secondly, as we have argued earlier, the mirasi control in the district was not very strong. It was not the magnates, but a combination of small and middle mirasidars who seem to have been the dominant group in most of South Arcot.

The two administrative measures which led to the upsurge of the mirasidars of South Arcot in May 1841 were both initiated by the principal collector of the district, W. Ashton. The first, and also the direct cause of the movement, was an attempt to tax certain lands included within the precincts of the villages, which had hitherto been exempt from tax : namely, house-sites and the attached gardens, called *nattam* in South Arcot. The second measure was a relatively long-drawn-out process resulting from Ashton's insistence that all such lands as was liable to assessment but left waste, and on which consequently the revenue demand had not been enforced, should be transferred from the original occupant to anybody who would give *darkast* or proposal for it. The first and second measures were partly related, for in a number of cases the original *nattam* had become waste, and *darkasts* were submitted for these sites. Throughout the district the mirasidars were clamorous over these two issues. There was protest and defiance, and Ashton's authority seemed to be weakened. He was ultimately

recalled and the government sent Mr. Dent as the Commissioner to enquire into the popular discontent in the district. Dent submitted his report by the end of August 1841 with a detailed account of the course and causes of the movement.⁴³ The report was later published.⁴⁴

The course of the movement indicated the actual forms of the protest. After finishing his settlement with the important wet taluks of Mannargudi and Chidambaram and the large, generally mixed taluk of Villapuram, Ashton issued the order taxing *nattam* land ; this was about the middle of April 1841. He then visited the taluks of Trikalore, Trinomalai, Chetpat and Tindivanam, in each of which he faced protest and opposition. At Trikalore, "on the first day of commencing the distribution of pattas, the ryots of a few small poor villages took their pattas, but immediately afterwards threw them down on the ground and refused to carry them away ; they were gathered up and secured by the *monigars* and *karnams* of the respective villages."⁴⁵ The attempt on the next day was also a failure ; in addition, some people came forward in a body declaring their determination to refuse the receipt of their pattas if the *nattam* tax was still demanded. The collector was at a loss ; he punished the most vociferous ryot but to no effect ; his authority seemed "first to have weakened". Consequently, he simply delivered pattas to the *monigars* of the villages.

At Trinomalai, the next taluk for settlement, the opposition was greater. In the first two days, the mirasidars of a few small villages took their pattas, but with the coming of the ryots from the distant villages, the opposition increased and the whole body assembled near the principal collector's *katcheri* (office), and "for sometime clamorously stated their objections to the tax loudly protesting against it."⁴⁶ Here again, Ashton merely called the names of the *monigars* in order to distribute the pattas among them, and all those who were absent were fined Rs. 6 per head, the total amount of fine being Rs. 600.

Information of what happened in Trikalore and Trinomalai came to Chetpat, the next taluk to be settled, well before the principal collector's arrival, and here "many of the most dissatisfied from both these taluks had assembled and the opposition to the new tax was therefore more determined and organised."⁴⁷ The principal collector thought of depending upon the *monigars* for the distribution of pattas but he was disappointed in Chetpat when "it was intimated from the crowd that no *monigar* would be permitted to take the ryots' pattas when the ryots themselves were present."⁴⁸ Violent noise and cla-

mour followed when Ashton tried to arrest some of them, and in the *melee* some of the crowd threw handfuls of dust at him.⁴⁹ Ashton then took shelter in a nearby indigo factory but the crowd followed him there too. Finding no way out, Ashton assured the people that the objectionable tax would be abolished, and issued a public notice later to all taluks proclaiming its formal abolition.⁵⁰

From Chetpat, Ashton came to Cuddalore and after a week's rest went to Tindivanam to complete the settlements of the taluk. In a letter dated 25 May 1841, he wrote to the Board of Revenue that the withdrawal of the *nattam* demand had not had the desired effect and that "it was not in fact the real occasion of the ill-feeling evinced by the people".⁵¹ There seemed to be a lot of other demands, the most important of which was against the transfer of lands left waste from the original occupants to the strangers. The very question of mirasi right was involved in it, and at certain levels it was the mirasidars who organised the opposition. Indeed, Dent called it "a more fruitful source of discontent in the district."⁵²

A study of the course of the South Arcot movement thus highlights two important features. The first is the general "popularity" of the movement directly involving innumerable people over the taluks, both on the *nattam* and the waste land issues. There are some reasons to believe that even the labourers with no pattas would have been affected by the *nattam* taxation since their house-sites were never formally exempted before the proclamation of the collector at Chetpat.⁵³ Secondly, the mirasidars were in the mainstream of the movement with an important part of their "right" at stake. The question of control of the mirasidars over the waste land in the village was a vexed issue, producing occasional conflicts between them and the government throughout the nineteenth century in Tamilnadu. Why the question became suddenly vital so as to bring about a general confrontation in South Arcot by the early 1840s is a point which needs special consideration.

A plausible explanation is what Dr. Brian Murton has called the British misunderstanding of the function of the waste in Tamil agriculture.⁵⁴ According to Murton, the nature and role of the waste in the agro-ecological system of Tamilnadu in the late eighteenth century had been ignored by the British settlement officials when they failed to understand the importance of "short fallow" and "grass fallow" cultivation and consequently completely excluded it from the classification of land they had made. It appears from Murton's argument that this

mistake in the classification of land had radical effects on a region where both the soil conditions and the rainfall levels varied in the extreme, that is to say, in a basically dry district. Indeed, Murton's data were collected from one such dry district, Salem. As far as the waste in South Arcot was concerned, Murton's argument might not be very relevant : parts of the districts were wet, and in those parts we hear not of the inferior but of the superior sort of land becoming waste.⁵⁵ In fact, it could be argued that because of an increasing gap between the high land revenue demand and the low profits from cultivation, much labour and capital moved from the better to the inferior land in South Arcot.⁵⁶

The second way of explaining the confrontation is to see it as the product of increasing demand for land from the non-mirasi cultivators and the growing official concern for this. This view, however, is to be taken critically. It is true that Dent's Report, and the government's comment on Ashton's own admission argued that the insistence on the transfer of waste land was motivated by a genuine concern for the welfare of the less privileged in society. But this stand was taken only after the disturbance took place. By contrast, some earlier court records suggest that what the government was really concerned about was its respective right vis-a-vis the mirasi.⁵⁷ Moreover, as was later pointed out by Dent,⁵⁸ and was clear from a number of court cases,⁵⁹ the person putting in the *darkast* was not necessarily alone. In many cases, the extent of land taken by the proposers was small and not always properly cultivated at least partly because of their inconvenient location,⁶⁰ and out of the total extent thus taken, the quantity left waste very considerably exceeded the quantity cultivated.⁶¹ Mutual dissensions among the mirasidars was not an infrequent cause of the *darkasts* and consequently of suits in the court. There could be conflict between two mirasidars if one of them gave *darkast* for this small amount of waste land belonging to the other. The role of the typical mirasidar and the typical *parakudi* might not be involved in each case.

However, the confrontation between the mirasidar and the government can also be explained by progressive impoverishment of the majority of the former immediately preceding the incident. How this impoverishment took place and how it led to the clash should be carefully studied. As we know, prices of agricultural produce fell greatly in the district between 1839 and 1841 : the prices of cholum, and ragi fell from Rs. 122 and Rs. 144 per Garce to Rs. 79 and 72 respectively while the prices of

second sort paddy fell from Rs. 89 to Rs. 55 per Garce. (One Garce=3200 Madras Measures). The price fall caused an increased poverty among many cultivators who had to meet a fixed land revenue demand in money in spite of the fact that their income was falling. The mirasidars who were also pattadars were affected in the same way. There are some general reports of growing poverty among the mirasidars of South Arcot in the early 1840s.⁶² The result was the inability to cultivate as extensively as previously ; and increasing waste land was a product of that. However, increasing waste land meant increasing loss of revenue for the government, and though the holding of waste land was always claimed as part of the mirasi right, the government insisted on its distribution among those who wanted it for cultivation on due payment. It was the small mirasidars who owned the increasing waste land. Transfer of a considerable amount of lands from their hands to new proposers does amply testify this : in most cases the lands involved were small. However, the small lands transferred were often vital for the operation of agriculture—lands sometimes with a well, a pond with trees and even with a crop grown-up.⁶³ In some cases, a transfer indeed meant ruin of the original holders. No wonder that it was the small mirasidars who were most vociferous in the South Arcot movement in 1841.

It can be pointed out that in a few cases of transfer, the *patta monigars* or relatively big mirasidars were involved.⁶⁴ But they could not maintain their identity as a separate group in the course of the movement. It was a combination of small and middle mirasidars who participated in the movement of 1841, determining all its forms of protest. The bigger mirasidars could not control them. One such big mirasidar really committed suicide supposing that he had compromised his and his parties' interests by joining the movement and then submitting to authority. The man was Thubumulla Reddy, of Tindivanam taluk. "The Reddy was a man of great personel worth and respectability, and was, on the discovering of the combination (of ryots), sent for by the collector for the purpose of reasoning with him. The Reddy then admitted the justice of the Collector's arguments and the folly of his own conduct, and was first to declare his willingness to submit to the authority. Actuated, as there is every reason to believe by a sense of shame in having failed in his duty to the cirkar and *in having forsaken his party*, he returned that night to his village and shot himself in the most deliberate manner" (*italics mine*).⁶⁵ The so-called

“disturbances” in South Arcot were really an agitation of the mirasidars, which of course had its own limitation.

V

The nature of mirasi protest against colonial government in south India can now be reviewed in the light of the preceding discussion. We have seen that the interaction between the government and the mirasidars in rural Tamilnadu involved a complex praxis and that such complexity resulted from the varied socio-economic relations in which the mirasidars of the region were embedded. The wide areal variations of the mirasi response has been specifically explained in terms of different agro-ecological systems in their actual operations as well as the differentiation of the mirasidars themselves. Different mirasidars were in different situations vis-a-vis the control of the means of production and vis-a-vis the benefits that such control generated. While the mirasidars of the secure areas of Tinneveli were trying to maintain a relatively monopolistic position in the local grain market, their counterparts in the less secure tracts were trying to maintain a more tenuous control over their less valuable resources. The magnates of Tanjore were comparable to the most secure wet land mirasidars of Tinneveli in many ways ; but the former were more powerful, united and concerted in their action. They more successfully defended a strong position vis-a-vis the government and vis-a-vis the control of the means of production—land, labour and capital. Moreover, agrarian changes from time to time guided the mirasi response throughout. When the moderate control that the particular category (small to medium) of the mirasidars in South Arcot was threatened by a number of developments, they went to straight action.

The study of the praxis between the diverse types of mirasidars and between the mirasidars and the revenue arm of the colonial government thus explains the complex, rather multiple meaning of the term mirasidar. By negating the purely jurisdictional right of the mirasidar and his conceptual uniformity, the study further shows that they were not all elites. Though it is possible to distinguish many big mirasidars from the rank and file of the landowners, they could also successfully integrate the latter from time to time. Further, the conflict between the government and the mirasidar did generate material on agrarian relations also, but these should not be explained on a simple “wet” vs “dry” dichotomy as has been done in some recent studies.⁶⁶

Indeed, the diversity of material conditions upon which the local agrarian organization was based is great and the *total* context of mirasi activities is important to understand before any adequate explanation of their behaviour vis-a-vis the government or of the nature of rural politics in the nineteenth century Tamilnadu is attempted.

REFERENCES

- ¹ This has reference to the Subaltern School led by Professor Ranajit Guha, especially Professor Guha's own writing. cf. R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I* (New Delhi, 1982) and *II* (New Delhi, 1983) in addition to his own book, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1983).
- ² Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, pp. 6-7.
- ³ See *Replies to the Seventeen Questions proposed by the Govt. of Fort St. George relative to the Mirasi Right* (Madras, 1818). The book includes Ellis's note and answers with special reference to the region traditionally known as Tondaimandalam along with another set of answers by Sancaraya, the Sheristadar in the Collectorate of Madras and an appendix specially prepared by Ellis.
- ⁴ See Burton Stein, 'Agrarian Integration in South India' in R.E. Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (Madison, 1969).
- ⁵ See Stein's paper (memeo), *On thesis, on method and on guard*, read in the Symposium on Economic Processes in India 1800-1947 at the University of Pennsylvania, April 1975, p. 15.
- ⁶ This is a point which has been generally admitted by all studies like A. Sarada Raju, *Economic Conditions in the Madras Presidency 1800-1850* (Madras, 1941), Nilmani Mukherjee, *The Ryotwari System in Madras 1792-1827* (Calcutta, 1962) and Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India* (Cambridge, 1965). Theoretically speaking, the state demand was supposed to be 40 to 50 per cent of the gross produce since the introduction of the revised ryotwari system in about 1820, but the actual rate varied widely.
- ⁷ See Mukherjee, *op.cit.*, pp. 105-6.
- ⁸ The Statement is based on Ellis, *op.cit.*, relevant sections.
- ⁹ The word *panguvali*, particularly current in Tinneveli, meant a village where the mirasidar had the full right to transfer his land. See Board of Revenue's Consultations (henceforward Board's Cons) 19 Oct. 1837, Back Number (henceforward BN) 51, Board of Revenue Number (henceforward BOR Vol) 1578, p. 12897.
- ¹⁰ There is evidence that even non-mirasi villages were sometimes passing as mirasi. The collector of Tinneveli reported in 1836 that there were "many of the villages where there was no mirasi,

- and that in the taluk of Nadumandalam... it was discovered that 28 villages passing as mirasi no mirasi really existed." See Board's Cons 29 August 1836, BN 55, BOR Vol 1588, in pp. 11793-11807.
- ¹¹ See Kathleen Gough, 'Caste in a Tanjore village', in Leach (ed.), *Aspects of caste in South India, Ceylone and northwest Pakistan* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 23.
 - ¹² See 'Papers relating to the Legislation for the Protection of under-tenants, in ryotwari tracts, with remarks' in G.O. No. 3594 (confdl.) 9 December 1914, pp. 66-67.
 - ¹³ Board's Cons 16 Feb 1826, BN 54, para 12, BOR Vol. 1055, in pp. 1912-28.
 - ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
 - ¹⁵ Board's Cons 1 Nov 1827, BN 53, para 41, BOR Vol 1124, in pp. 12988-13040.
 - ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, para 42.
 - ¹⁷ These rates were as high as 10 to 75 per cent of the *tirwa*. See Board's Cons 24 Nov 1836, BN 76, para 37, BOR Vol 1535, in pp. 16944-17360.
 - ¹⁸ See Board's Cons 4 Jan 1827, BN 179, para 20, BOR Vol 1089 in pp. 638-81.
 - ¹⁹ The meaning of *amani*, applicable both to Tinneveli and Tanjore, differed in other districts like Salem, where it meant simply the ryotwari system. The ignorance of the difference was the source of a common mistake which even Wilson's *Glossary* (London, 1855) has made.
 - ²⁰ See the *Collector's Report on the Triennial Lease in Tinneveli dated 14.9.1809* (no date), pp. 5-6.
 - ²¹ For example, the opposition of the mirasidars of Tenkasi in Tinneveli at the close of 1817. See Nilmani Mukherjee, *op.cit.*, pp. 106-7.
 - ²² Why the British preferred the *olungu* was perfectly clear : its administration cost less and it helped the state trade conducted under the revenue arrangement.
 - ²³ Board's Cons 24 Oct 1822, BN 55 BOR Vol 928, pp. 9813-20.
 - ²⁴ Board's Cons 8 Aug 1822, BN 22, BOR Vol 922, pp. 7569-80.
 - ²⁵ See A. J. Stuart, *Tinneveli District Mannual* (Madras, 1879) p. 74.
 - ²⁶ Board's Cons 4 January 1827, BN 179, para 48, in BOR Vol 1082.
 - ²⁷ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁸ Board's Cons 7 Jan 1828, BN 47, paras 5, 6 and 7 in BOR Vol 1134.
 - ²⁹ Board's Cons 4 Jan 1827, BN 179, para 8, in BOR Vol 1089. Here the issue was the distribution of pattas among the mirasidars only.
 - ³⁰ See the sub-collector's report of the petition no. 1299 of 1833 in Board's Cons 13 Nov 1834, BN 103, para 2, BOR Vol 1428, pp. 12261-64.
 - ³¹ *Ibid.*, para 5.

- ⁸² Board's Cons 24 Nov 1834, BN 92, para 7, BOR Vol 1430. Indeed, the grain dealers sometimes secured high profits from spatial variations of prices over a very short distance along well-travelled routes.
- ⁸³ Though the taluk of Shivali (modern Sirkali) was not very rich in resources, it had a sizeable group of substantial mirasidars. We hear much later of such big mirasidars as Chidambaranatha Mudaliyar of the area, who was said to hold 40,000 acres in 1913 (which may not be true as Dharma Kumar has pointed out in her article, 'Landownership and Inequality in the Madras Presidency, 1853-54 to 1946-47' in the *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol XII, No. 3, p. 261). There is, however no doubt of the existence of wealthy mirasidars in the area even earlier.
- ⁸⁴ See Board's Cons 21 Jan 1828 BN 46 BOR Vol 1134, pp. 855-1002.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, para 38.
- ⁸⁶ These were some of the magnates: Siva Sumbian Murgapah Mudili (Mudaliyar) of Shivali, Chinna Sumbian of Kudavasel, Sabapaty Pillay of Runimgudi, and Ramanuja Pillay, of Kupium. See *ibid.* Was Murgapah Mudaliyar related in any way with the later magnate Chidambaranatha Mudaliyar?
- ⁸⁷ See R. E. Frykenberg, *Guntur District 1788-1848: A History of Local Influence and Central authority in South India* (Oxford, 1965).
- ⁸⁸ Board's Cons 31 Dec 1828 BN 33, especially paras 3 and 7 in BOR Vol 1136, pp. 1231-40.
- ⁸⁹ It does not mean that there were no magnates in Puttukottai, but only that they could not react in the way the Shivali Magnates did.
- ⁴⁰ The only probable difference between Puttukottai and the non-river-valley Tinneveli was the absence in the former of a rich dry culture associated with the *nanjai-mel-punjai* of the latter.
- ⁴¹ For an excellent account of the mechanism of bribe in the *amani* see Board's Cons 26 July 1838, BN 35 para 22, in BOR Vol 1619.
- ⁴² See BOR Vol 1783, pp 17828-18911.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ See the *Selections from the Records of South Arcot No. 1—Report of the Commissioner Mr Dent on the disturbance of the district in 1841* (Collectorate Press, 1869). Henceforward referred as *Dent's Report*.
- ⁴⁵ See *Dent's Report*, para 4, p. 9.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, para 5, p. 10.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, para 6, p. 10.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 10.
- ⁴⁹ See Ashton's report to the Board of Revenue in Board's Cons 6 May 1841, BN 15, BOR Vol 1757, pp. 6565-66. It was only after the Chetpat incident that he reported about the defiance to the Board.

- ⁵⁰ See Board's Cons 27 May 1841, BN 29, BOR Vol 1758, pp. 7325-33.
- ⁵¹ Board's Cons 27 May 1841 BN 31, BOR Vol 1758, p. 7338.
- ⁵² See Dent's *Report*, para 11, p. 13.
- ⁵³ Board's Cons 27 May 1841, BN 29, BOR Vol 1758, para 13.
- ⁵⁴ Brian J. Murton, 'Land and Class : Cultural, Social and Biophysical Integration in Interior Tamilnadu in the eighteenth Century' in R. E. Frykenberg (ed.), *Land tenure and Peasant in South Asia* (New Delhi, 1979).
- ⁵⁵ See Sullivan's report on the state of South Arcot dated 20 Feb 1841 in Board's Cons 3 March 1842, BN 1, BOR Vol 1796, para 6.
- ⁵⁶ See for a discussion, Arun Bandopadhyay, *The Agrarian Economy of Tamilnadu 1820-1855* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Calcutta University, 1979), Chapter IV.
- ⁵⁷ See Ashton's comment on the suit no 28 of 1840, in Board's Cons 30 July 1840, BN 37, BOR Vol 1711, in pp. 9179-88.
- ⁵⁸ See Dent's *Report*, para 15, p. 16.
- ⁵⁹ See, for example, suit no 19 of 1840, 217 of 1840, and 313 of 1840, the details of which are available in Board's Cons 24 Sept 1840, BN 48, 49 and 52 in BOR Vol 1718, The first suit was for the recovery of one *cawni* of dry land, the second for 2/16th *cawni* of garden land and the third was only 1/16th *cawni* of *nattam*. One *cawni* = 1.3 acres.
- ⁶⁰ See the Table of suits filed in the auxiliary court at Cuddalore against the principal collector, available in Dent's *Report*, p. 17. Out of 37 suits between 1839 and 1842, 27 cases were only for a fraction of a *cawni*.
- ⁶¹ See the statement showing the extent of land made over on *darkast* and portion thereof cultivated and left waste in 1838-39 in Dent's *Report* p. 15.
- ⁶² Take, for example, the principal collector Hallett's comment on *kusar* or additional water tax : "It is notorious that the people of South Arcot have gradually year by year become poorer and consequently more clamorous for indulgence from the cirkar." Board's Cons 15 Dec 1842, BN 35, BOR Vol 1838 pp. 16773-98.
- ⁶³ See Dent's *Report*, p. 14. See also suit no 125 of 1840 in Board's Cons 13 Aug 1840, BN 50 BOR 1714 pp. 10274-81.
- ⁶⁴ See, for example suit no. 312 of 1840 in Board's Cons 24 Sep 1840, BN 50, BOR Vol 1718, pp. 12010-19.
- ⁶⁵ BOR Vol. 2383, pp. 9728-31.
- ⁶⁶ See for example, David Washbrook *The emergence of Provincial Politics. The Madras Presidency 1870-1920* (Cambridge, 1975).

3

PEASANT RESISTANCE TO BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN BURMA 1886-1891*

PARIMAL GHOSH

The object of this paper is to look into the prolonged phase of violence in Upper Burma that followed upon the annexation of that country by the British in 1885-86.

It may be noted that a similar period of rural violence had succeeded the first two Anglo-Burmese wars,¹ and that the process of securing Pax Britannica had stage by stage followed the line of British control upward from the South. Our intention here is to evaluate that record of violence in its final stage in terms of popular resistance to imperialism.

In looking into what was happening in Upper Burma in the late '80s, care should be taken to not to confuse that with the turmoil in the deep South which could well have been due to rapid commercialisation of agriculture. British officers almost unanimously blamed the Southern troubles on the shock of the Burmese monarchy's collapse, but we may be more circumspect about that. The Indian revolt of 1857 and the American Civil War had created a shortage of rice in the world market, and the Suez Canal had helped to channelise that demand to Lower Burma. In a matter of two decades, the delta of the Irrawaddy became the stage of feverish expansion of acreage under rice. This was rendered smooth, among other factors, by British land revenue regulations which turned land into a saleable asset, and thereby attracted that inevitable beneficiary of imperialist rule, the moneylender. How far his activity provoked the growing troubles in the South has to be treated as an open question, but it is fair to assume that given the widely divergent economic contexts in Upper and Lower Burma, the character of the troubles differed too.

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It has to be understood that the crisis for Upper Burma predated its annexation in December 1885. Its beginning, in fact, can well be traced back to 1852, when the Burmese Court lost control over the entire South following the Second Anglo-Burmese War. This was a crippling blow, for the resultant loss of vital resources rendered the traditional type of Burmese administration impracticable for Upper Burma. When the Court sought to tackle the question by tightening control and thereby generating more resources from whatever little it still commanded, the crisis came to impinge upon the remotest districts of Upper Burma. The imperialists finally took over in 1885 : they then found that Upper Burma had been in a state of chaos for a long time.

Perhaps the most fundamental fact about the Burmese polity in 1885 was its divided existence, with independent Burmese rule in the North, and the British in the South. Understandably, the loss of Lower Burma grievously hurt the viability of the Burmese administration in the North which now had to make do with much less in terms of resources than before. We do not know for sure how far this fact by itself served as the dynamics in Upper Burmese politics. But the fact is, that after the death of the wise king Mindon in 1878 there started a long phase of vicious in-fighting within the Burmese ruling class punctuated by severe rebellions all over the realm.

A look into whatever little we know of the development of the Burmese land revenue structure at this point should enable us to appreciate not only the nature of the crisis but also the character of the pre-British structure that the loss of Lower Burma was now rendering impractical.

Given the lack of reliable sources, it is difficult for us to go back earlier than the 17th century, and as British officers discovered, by that time land in Burma was divided into two broad categories of Royal and Private lands. "All lands cleared by cultivators were private property and were not subject to taxation."² The King was, however, theoretically "lord of all lands, and in the course of time, as the property of his subjects was confiscated for rebellion or other offences, the area of the Royal lands extended more and more."³ There had been times when the King had his estate tilled by his personal slaves,⁴ but gradually, tenants, paying the land tax, came to take over. Private lands, on the other hand, continued to be tax free. In the middle of the 17th century, during the reign of the Thalun King (1632-1648 A.D.), boundaries of all lands came to be clearly demarcated.⁵ The King's estates were clearly marked

out, and lands were set apart for the use of the Ahmudans, the service people who served in the Court, the palace or the army. Further, to provide maintenance to the thugyis, in every circle land was set apart from which they could levy the thugyi-za, which came to about 1/10th of the gross produce.⁶ Finally, the lands where the ordinary villager could settle was demarcated. Over time, however, the officials began to collect the thugyi-za from all land cleared and cultivated in their circles. As it was reported, the practice was still continuing at the time of imperialist take over. The demand varied from 1/4th to 1/10th of the gross yield and almost all categories of land were touched.⁷

About the same time, the land of the Ahmudans had been subdivided into two classes; (1) "sa-mye (land to be eaten), from which crops were raised for the use of Ahmudans"—were always considered as Royal lands, and therefore, paid Royal dues; (2) "ne-mye (dwelling lands), set apart for the dwelling houses of Ahmudans"—which practically became ancestral property and hence tax free. Over time ne-mye had fruit trees planted on them and became valuable orchards.⁸

In the reign of Bodwpaya (1782-1819), we are told of another great stock-taking which saw the recording of all Royal and ancestral lands.⁹ Finally in 1885 came a desperate attempt on the part of the Burmese Court to assume direct control over the land structure. Now was introduced what the British officers came to call the Land & Revenue Act. Its most striking point was certainly its close similarity with the British law in Lower Burma. A clear attempt to modernize the land revenue structure, to try and augment the meagre resources of the State, its main thrust was thus directed against the growing usurpation by local interests, the thugyis and others local level officials, who had been benefiting at the expense of the State.¹⁰ British officers actually reported that their depredations had, on the eve of the annexation, created a severe insecurity of tenure.¹¹ The Court had been also forced to hand over in certain areas the right of revenue collection from its own lands to *akundans* or tax-farmers who paid a lump sum for the privilege.¹²

Elsewhere, it became quite dependent on the local administration. As it was commented by British officials, this cut down the share of the revenues for the Court. "The process of collecting the land revenue was made through so many officials that in Burmese times the net collections were never high, though the cultivators themselves had to pay the very highest possible rate."¹³ More specifically, "In Myadaung the Deputy Commissioner's enquiries lead him to believe that almost all the

land is really state land, having become so through confiscation many years ago. But as a matter of fact, large areas are claimed by the leading officials and by others . . . But the Deputy Commissioner is inclined to believe that there are no private rights to these lands, and that the most that can be alleged is that the officials exercise certain rights over these lands *ex-officio* . . . He believes that all the land (with some unspecified exceptions) was state property and that the King formerly levied taxes on it ; that the taxes were remitted in the time of the late King ; but that the officials continued to levy the taxes as before but for their own benefit instead of for the benefit of the State. What has actually happened is that the myothugyis have established more or less firmly the right to the uncultivated land in these circles, that they levy large rents on them . . . ”¹⁴ Similar was the situation in the Ruby Mines district, where, as it was reported, all land was classified as Royal land, but no land tax was paid to the State : “Payment is made to the thugyi.”¹⁵ In Shwebo, again, it was said that—“In former days the thugyi only collected the thathamida tax. Land revenue on Crown land and irrigation taxes were collected by the Pedawoks, who came from Mandalay. During the last two years (i.e. from 1885) the thugyis have collected the thathamida, Crown land (sic) and salt tax”.¹⁶ Obviously the changed process of collection also reflected the relative strength of the local interests. Growth of local control was also noted with regard to the irrigation tax. One of the central exactions, it gradually became a tax for the local officials. As the Deputy Commissioner of Myadaung observed—“these works may be considered as private works carried out by voluntary co-operation, though as a matter of fact the local officials are the mainspring of the business, and in most cases the works are carried out by their orders and without payment.”¹⁷ Further,—“The local officials in this as in many other points has assumed the position claimed in the expression *l’etat c’est moi*. I suppose it was owing to the distance from the seat of Government. . . The local myothugyi or wun was the embodiment of Government in the eyes of the people—the *min* and *aroya* of popular language—and he acted as such. The result was that in so far as the water-works were ordered by the local official they were State works, but the local official not only representing the State, but absorbing it in himself, the works were his works and the King and his officers had no concern with them . . . They (the local officers) probably advanced money to the cultivators for the small expenses necessary, and

take payment in a share of the crop with the usurious profits usual in such transactions."

The Myadaung Deputy Commissioner also cited several instances of the ways by which such usurpation took place. Thus, it was reported that "... there is a woman in Nagasin who is said to be a landowner. She is a relative of a former official of Pyinzala who seized the land to pay himself for having hired soldiers to fight in one of the King's wars in place of the Nagasin men, who failed to furnish their quota."¹⁹ Again, in the reign of Shwebo Min, when the villages of Kyaukpon and Kalon of Katha district were transferred to Myadaung as the property of the Myadaung queen,—“many families were removed across the new boundary and were given assistance in money and other ways by the Katha myothugyi. In return for this assistance the Katha myothugyi to this day claims the right to levy a share of the produce of the villages of Thanbaya and Nyaunkyidauk for his own benefit, on the ground that the land is his by virtue of it having been cleared at his predecessor's expense.”²⁰ Another case cited was with regard to the Kawlin circle where the local official claimed all the land—“to be entitled to sell it, which is an unusual assumption, and to levy a 30% share of the produce for his own consumption.”²¹ Further—“In Nagasin and Pale, both parts of Pyinzala, myothugyis and thugyis state that all land is private property and not Government land.”²² Interestingly enough, in none of these cases was any attempt made to deny “the liability of the cultivators to pay thathamida and other Government demands, which is elsewhere the condition of tenure”²³ and that, of course, only underlined the fact of usurpation.

An important question here would be if such growth in local interests led to a hike in the demand from cultivator. It does seem that the 30% share of the produce claimed by the local official in the Kawlin circle was quite an exaction. In the reign of Mindon Min a 20% share had been claimed from some of the revenue districts of what later came to be called the Northern Division,—Sheweashegyaung, Nagagayaiing, Mowlu, Wuntho, Manle and some such districts. “Only these circles were liable to furnish so much paddy for the use of the Court when called upon, which was at regular interval of two or three years.... When levied for the King, the myothugyi kept on an average about half for himself, but as a Royal tax it was abolished about the beginning of Thebaw's reign, and has since been continued by the myothugyi for his own benefit...”²⁴ The British officers made specific studies in Moda, Katha and Yinke

—and in every case the conclusion was—“the collection by the myothugyi has arisen by an abuse, and dates from King Thebaw’s accession.”²⁵

As the Deputy Commissioner observed—“The whole social history of the district is summed up in the growth of myothugyis (and similar officials) at the expense of the thugyis of the people and the State.” And that—“Their opportunity lay in the great distance from the seat of Government, which enabled him first to suppress the thugyis who had . . . formerly received orders of appointment from the King and shared accordingly in the commission in revenue collection . . .”²⁶ It is understandable that the act of usurpation or of taking a cut from the Royal dues must have come to touch upon other categories of collection as well. Indeed,—“In these and similar other matters the myothugyis assumed the role of the Government, the King and his officers, seeming something external with no greater concern in the management of affairs beyond receiving certain dues.”²⁷

From British sources, at least, it would thus seem that while the local level officials benefited—the process ultimately must have created a burden for the payers. As it was elsewhere commented, the thugyis over time came to take over all right of disposing off unoccupied land. There were actually—“certain recognised modes of acquiring permanent heritable rights in land from remote times, (which) were never abrogated by Royal order, and were legally in force, though often ignored by thugyis, who disposed off land within their own circle in the late King’s time pretty much as they chose.”²⁸

What remains to be explained is the continuing loyalty of the people towards their local bosses. And there it has to be understood that given the decentralized nature of the entire structure, allegiance was likely to be directly to the immediate overlord than to the far off Royalty. The local officials more often than not were hereditary occupants of their offices which implied that the nature of their position was no less than that of local ruling houses. They were certainly the most influential people in their locality, and at least to start with, their selection to their offices depended on the extent of their influence on the people. It is likely, therefore, that even when they were enriching themselves, they did not go beyond what can be called an unwritten restraint. It has also been suggested that there may have been some kind of kinship ties between the local boss and the people, and that the Myos—the unit on which the myothugyi presided, were really ethnically homogenous, founded in some

ancient forgotten days by people belonging to the same tribe or stock. More specifically, the Ahmudans, the service people, were divided according to the regiment they served in the army, and care was taken to have the same kind of people grouped in the same particular locality. All this naturally facilitated loyalty to the immediate superior. In fact, it has been held that the myothugyi was more the leader of the people of the locality than a servant of the Court.²⁹

Apart from these what must have counted very materially, was that the economic foundations of the local officials rested entirely on their own units. Not only was their enrichment secured from the locality, their consumption was equally locality oriented. As the Deputy Commissioner of Mandalay reported,—before King Mindon, more or less seven broad kinds of taxes were collected from the people, and of these, receipt of no less than six were appropriated by the local officials.³⁰ It can be postulated that much of this consumption must have resulted in some kind of indirect benefit for the people. To take one of the instances cited before, the Katha Myothugyi claimed certain extra rights of extraction on the ground that his predecessor had helped the people to clear fresh land and settle themselves. This may well have been a typical case. Given the fact that private right to land accrued only when somebody cleared it, and further, that such an operation was always expensive, we can understand that this could have been an avenue of enrichment for the local officials. We may note, again, how the local officialdom provided the initiative for the construction of irrigation works.

However, the changed circumstances following the loss of Lower Burma rendered this set-up an anathema. The Court now needed to centralise if it had to survive and though the Act of 1885 came too late in the day to be of any material importance, it was an assertion of royal policy that had been articulated even before by King Mindon.

A very typical reform of Mindon, who came to power in Upper Burma through a palace coup after the defeat in the Second Anglo-Burmese War, had been the introduction of the "thathamida" tax. It can well be described as an attempt to augment the resources of the State as quickly as possible without expanding the production base.

Roughly a house tax, by it each of his subjects was induced to offer a silver coin (Rs. 1.60) to his Chief Queen on the occasion of her confinement. Subsequently he converted this into a yearly payment of Rs. 3 per house, raising it later to

Rs. 10/-. We should note that this was over and beyond the general taxes and was quite an emergency measure to tide over a severe crisis. As far as is known the tax was not collected from houses of cripples or those otherwise unable to pay.³¹

Nor was the tax actually collected at a flat rate. The rate was only used to arrive at the sum due from a village by multiplying it by the number of houses counted in it. The sum arrived at was thereafter apportioned among the payers according to their paying capacity. Further, a degree of democratization was used at the lower level to cushion the impact of the tax. Thus, the British officers noted that the *thamadis* or the collectors—"were selected by the villagers who agreed to abide by their assessment. In former times these *thamadis* were required to go to the village pagoda and there sworn to fix the assessment on each villager to the best of their knowledge."³² Further, that the "average maximum rate of Rs 10 per house was only levied in years of prosperity. When the country was disturbed by rebellion, when disease and pestilence prevailed, and when crops failed, the tax was levied at lower rates. The highest assessment on one person is said to be Rs. 35 and the lowest Rs. 3."³³

However, it does seem that such a situation over time came to be confined to the realm of theory only. For instance, the swearing-in ceremony of the *thamadis* came to be discarded. "This practice has now fallen into disuse, the villagers selecting one or more of their elders to fix the assessment. These elders apportion the demand among the villagers according to their knowledge of the means of the payers, the property they possess, whether crops, land, cattle, jewels or houses. They make no enquiries from those concerned but decide each case from their own knowledge. There is no appeal from the decision of these arbitrators."³⁴ The person paying the highest rate was termed the *Kyedangyi* and he assisted the arbitrators in determining the amount each householder was called upon to pay. Several points here are clearly noticeable. The fact that village elders were taking over the task of extraction probably implied a degree of dissociation from the royal or central structure, and a proportionate growth of local autonomy. But with that we also can observe the beginning of a hiatus between the elders and the village community. The discarded swearing-in process must have had some value, in previous times, in terms of social control over the activities of the collectors. The involvement of the *Kyedangyi* in the extraction-machinery could be taken to confirm the same conclusion, demonstrating as it did, the degree of control that the better-off sections of the village society exer-

cised over it. However, both the developments,—that of the growing autonomy of the locality, and that of the widening gap between the leaders and the followers at the same level,—should be viewed as the two sides of the same process that resulted from the crisis created by imperialism. Thus, the Court being in a hurry to generate greater surplus within the existing production frame-work, had to depend on the local leaders, who in their turn took the opportunity to become more powerful than ever before.³⁵

Clearly, the Burmese Court could not have been too happy over this situation. The Burmese Act of 1885 had two pointed references to this problem of usurpation by local interests. On the one hand it entirely forbade the collection of Thugyi-Za, and on the other—"lands appropriated to the use of Ahmudans were resumed and fixed salaries given to soldiers of regiments in lieu of grants of land."³⁶ No doubt, these were big steps forward towards building up a centralised state structure, but to that extent, again, it went against the very grain of the established polity. The autonomy of the local interests, the insularity of the locality,—now came under direct pressure from the centralizing state. This was all the more so because of the forced, artificial character of the change. Centralization here did not follow from the creation of a unified home market, but was the straightforward result of a crisis created by imperialism. No radical social transformation was, therefore, in the offing, and the old decentralized structure was violently juxtaposed with the rising head of a centralizing state.

At the same time, a deliberate attempt was made to provide some incentive to the cultivators to increase production. This took the form of granting them permanent, heritable, and saleable right to their plots of land, thereby removing all sorts of communal control over land disposal. As the British officers noted, the Act of 1885 made it clear that—"Land could be acquired by grant with permanent heritable rights contingent practically only on payment of the revenue fixed at one-tenth the gross produce of the land." Again—"Absolute freedom in disposing of land was granted. Transfers had to be effected through the Court and registered, but there were no other formalities required." Finally, and this seems to be the logical sequel of the resumption of Royal control over the land structure—"Royal lands could be alienated from the state and become private property."³⁷

By thus turning land into a saleable asset, the Court was obviously trying to create the possibility of a future commercia-

lisation of the agrarian sector and thereby hoping for a rise in productivity. The stress on productivity was again evident from other sections of the Act of 1885. For instance, a graded system of exemption was introduced for those bringing new land under cultivation. Land was divided into 5 classes for the purpose of exemption of varying period keeping with the varying nature of jungle cleared. Further, penalties came to be fixed for those who would give up cultivation after taking advantage of the exemption clause.³⁸

The advent of imperialism of course forestalled all these.

The entire configuration then underwent a change. It was no longer a question of rivalry between the Court and the local leaders over control of resources at the local level. Imperialism was now out to build a state that would not tolerate such 'dissipation' as had gone on in the previous era. Its needs were infinitely greater, geared as they were to the needs of the metropolitan economy. We should understand that it was fundamentally a question of two structures of authority: one that had grown up over the ages shaped by the logic of Burmese reality, the other a superimposed structure that moved under the compulsion of colonial motivation.

We may look into the subsequent development of the British structure to understand the very methodical way in which the isolation of the locality was sought to be transgressed. The annexed territory was thus divided into fourteen districts—"each under an efficient civil officer with assistants and supported by a force of Indian and Native Police...." Further, the "Chief Commissioner, being desirous of adopting for the new territory a very simple form of administration and wishing to be in immediate communication with the district officers, proposed to omit from the system those Divisional Commissionerships...." which in Lower Burma as also in some other provinces had been another rung in the hierarchy. Subsequently, as the Viceroy feared an overweight on the Chief Commissioner four Divisional Commissionerships were created.³⁹

What is more pertinent is the way in which the annexed areas were subjected to the colonial law code that had been formulated over the years through the Indian experience. Thus, though initially officers at the local level were given large discretionary powers and instructed that "they were to work as far as practicable through the indigenous judicial and executive agency"⁴⁰, by March, 1886, the Government had come out with what was called "Provisional Instructions", which pro-

posed to introduce another scheme. The official comment was—"They are in harmony with the spirit of our Indian codes, while they also provide for due regard to the Native habits and methods of procedure. They provide for the administration of Criminal Justice in accordance with the principles of the Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal procedure and the Evidence Act, subject to certain exceptions. . . ." ⁴¹ The change from the past was all the more radical as—of the exceptions "the chief is the limitation on the right of appeal from orders passed by subordinate Courts." It was held that "(it) will be readily understood that an unrestricted right of appeal, either criminal or civil matters, can only be satisfactorily exercised in a highly developed system of administration, for which the recently annexed territories are not yet ripe." ⁴²

In revenue matters the official dictums were even more indicative of the new state of affairs. The old way of doing things had to be given up, and resources properly mustered; above all, dissipation of all kinds had to be actively discouraged. This was, indeed, the whole object of the administrative tightening we have just seen.

To start with, state revenue was categorised under the 9 heads of capitation tax, land tax on royal lands, revenue from ruby and jade, royalty on earth-oil, water rate from irrigated lands, fishery revenue, stamps, excise and forests. ⁴³ In most of the categories it was forthwith declared that returns from the local level officials were either tardy or altogether too small to be true. For instance, with regard to the capitation tax, which was the chief source of revenue, it was held that the statements furnished by the Hlutdaw, by which the returns came to about Rs. 31 lakhs—were products of "underestimation"; for, some years ago the yield had been 40 lakhs. Further, that "so far as may be possible, the over-due arrears should be realized. . . .", and that "Thugyis and Myooks must be made to understand that the retention of their posts depends on their getting in the coming years' revenue fully and punctually." All these were doubly important as "under-assessment" had continued to take place even after the annexation. ⁴⁴

Similar were the findings elsewhere. On returns from ruby it was thus reported that—"For the current year, ending on June 1886, the mines were leased to local thugyis at a rental of 2½ lakhs, of which a small part has as yet been paid." The remedy proposed was quite typical,—“The lease for future years will probably be given to a European firm who engage to work

through the natives, to introduce pumping machinery, and to pay a full rental.”⁴⁵ Again, enquiries were to be started on ways and means of raising the returns from jade mines and earth oil. On earth oil, it was reported that—“in former years the royalty . . . used to yield six lakhs of rupees to the King’s treasury. Recently it yielded only about three lakhs a year, and now the yield is at a rate far short even of the latter figure. There is no reason why the fullest revenue, consistent with a large output of this product, should not be realised.”⁴⁶ As for excise, in Burmese times tax on liquor or opium was generally considered a taboo as that was construed as giving some form of tacit encouragement to these “vices”. The new rulers accepted the custom and so prohibited their sale to the natives : further, opium could be smoked only by the Chinese and European soldiers were not allowed to buy the local brew. However, apart from these licensed liquor shops could be opened to cater to the demands of Indian, Chinese or civilian Europeans. This was, no doubt, the opening of a new source of income to the treasury.⁴⁷ About forest revenues, even on the eve of the annexation, Burma’s teak and miscellaneous forest products were for the most part leased to several big concerns, the biggest and by far the most important among whom was the Bombay-Burma Trading Corporation. The Government was considering whether these leases should be continued, but in the meantime District Officers might think in terms of how best to exploit what remained outside the leases.⁴⁸ Finally, in matters of land revenue, the imperialists were determined to hold on to what the pre-British crisis ridden state had claimed for its own in its last days.⁴⁹

Even such a perfunctory stock-taking as this thus clearly reveals two contrasting pictures. On the one hand, there was the shrinking revenue of the pre-British State, and on the other, a determined drive towards greater extraction. It should be understood that shrinking revenue cannot be explained plainly in terms of the corrupt officialdom, for corruption here was same as refusal to pay up the increased demand of the State. Burmese local officials had been as much representatives of the people as the servants of the Court⁵⁰ ; or, at the least, in the declining condition of a feudal set up, local potentates. Obviously, under the circumstances, if they were to succeed as the Court’s appointee they had to fail as the leader of the locality. The only way out was to “under-assess”— or to be corrupt. Even if the local potentates had been assessing ‘correctly’ and under-paying the State, it is easy to understand

the difference between the accumulation of the surplus at the locality, and its concentration at the level of the State. Clearly, this was no longer to be tolerated. The imperialist State had to centralise and stop the leakages. What Tucker, the Commissioner of the Eastern Division, noted, may thus well have been very typical of the whole country. "As it is, the people are somewhat exercised at having their villages visited by European officers, who actually count the houses and check the thugyis' returns."⁵¹

II

Just as imperialism cast its shadow on Upper Burma long before its armies actually started to move in, so the uprisings in Upper Burma actually began before Thebaw had ceased to rule. In fact, it was the considered opinion of the British Officers that Thebaw's Burma had been reduced to a sorry state before British take-over. Collection of capitation tax had fallen off sharply throughout the country through dacoity and 'peculation'⁵². In Shwebo district, it was reduced to one-half for sometime previous to British take-over.⁵³ Again, dacoity was so prevalent between the Mu and the Chindwin rivers that Alon township for example, was unable to pay in 1884 its usual revenue.⁵⁴ Similar was the fate of Ye-u district and several other tracts. The general atmosphere of lawlessness affected agricultural production substantially, and the irrigation works on which depended the agriculture of the dry zones of the central part of Upper Burma—in Kyaukse, Mandalay, Taundwingyi and Salen,—fell into disrepair.⁵⁵ The colonial administration went on to categorise three different sources of violence which had to be tackled to achieve any degree of pacification.⁵⁶ Firstly, there was, "The traditional outstanding feuds between neighbouring villages", that had sharpened with the politically transitional character of the times. Secondly, "there was the ordinary dacoity of the old regime, increased by the disintegrated remnants of Thebaw's armed force, and stimulated by the corrupt officials, who perceived in the advent of British rule the deathblow to their lucrative malpractices." Finally, the various moves of the "pretenders" to the throne. However, we may observe in the entire configuration the effects of the crisis that we have referred to. The developments at the level of the locality, in all the three categories, may thus be

understood in terms of the in-fighting in the ranks of the local officials, triggered off at the first instance by the growing needs of the pre-British state, and perpetuated thereafter through the imposition of imperialist control.

It is on this background that we shall have to judge the initial communication on Burma from the Government of India to the Secretary of State which described the country typically as one of the perpetual lawlessness. Conditioned as the British officers were by their experience in Lower Burma, it was concluded: "The population, though it cannot be described as warlike in the ordinary sense of the term, has a traditional and deep-rooted love of desultory fighting, raiding, gang-robbery, and similar kinds of excitement. Villages have long standing feuds with villages, and many young peasants, otherwise respectable, spend a season or two as dacoits without losing their reputation in the eyes of their fellow-villagers. If there were any under the old regime who had scruples about engaging in dacoity pure and simple, they always had plenty of opportunity for leading a very similar mode of life as partisans of one of the numerous pretenders to the throne, one or more of whom were generally in revolt against the *de facto* sovereign. . . . Sometimes a sovereign of unusual energy obtained comparative tranquility for a short period. . . . but such periods of tranquility were never of very long duration, because the efforts to organize a regular army and efficient police were always neutralized by the incapacity of the officials and the obstinate repugnance of the people to all kinds of discipline—a national peculiarity of which we have had much troublesome experience in Lower Burma, and which there survived thirty years of British rule."⁵⁷

Further, it was held that Thebaw, the last Burmese ruler, was of below average capabilities, and that under him government authority extended not beyond the Mandalay district and the immediate vicinity of the lines of communication; ". . . . and even within this limited area there was always a vary large amount of anarchy and maladministration. . . . Many of the robber chiefs who are now creating disturbances were already in arms against Thebaw long before our advance. One of the most formidable of them, the noted Bo Swe, who is still giving us a good deal of trouble, has been, it is said, defying with impunity the authorities of Mandalay and harrying the last twelve or thirteen years."⁵⁸

The troubles that the imperialists encountered upon their conquest were held to be a direct continuation of this trend,

compounded by the "bloodless" and therefore supposedly unconvincing character of British victory. What is more interesting to us is that—"when our troops arrived in Mandalay after an almost bloodless campaign of a few days' duration, they found that nearly the whole of the undisciplined levies called out to oppose our advance had spontaneously melted away."⁵⁹ The imperialists believed that, to these people who thus disappeared, British victory was "one of those royal incidents. . . . to which they attribute very little significance." In fact, the "feeling of national vanity or whatever else it may be called, in conjunction with the rapidity and bloodlessness of the initial campaign, has enabled the gang leaders and other ambitious chiefs both to augment the number of their adherents and to establish at various points a good many centres of resistance to our rule." The pity was only "if the Burmese had been from the first duly conscious of their natural weakness, or if an adequate impression of our power had been made on the popular imagination by one or two decisive battles, they might have been more capable of understanding the real situation and more disposed to recognise that for themselves and their country immediate submission was the wisest and the most patriotic cause."⁶⁰

Not astonishingly, many Burmese people did not take this view of things. So a line of action, that was moulded largely by prior experience in Lower Burma, was laid down to fight the desultory war raging in the interior. "(We) indicated the desirability of first thoroughly dominating a central area, and thence gradually expanding our jurisdiction *pari passu* with the means and opportunities at their (i.e. local British commanders') disposal." No "spasmodic and disconnected" expeditions were to be sent out to distant areas which could not be held on and which would only excite the wrath of the rebels on the villagers.⁶¹ In keeping with this general plan, the areas which came to witness the establishment of British authority were "the tracts bordering the Irrawaddy, the country around Mandalay and Bhamo, and the districts contiguous to our Lower Provinces. . . ." The broad military tactic adopted was "distribution of military posts in different localities, and the organization of small moveable columns capable of marching in whatever direction circumstances might require." Generally, it was believed that—"To have kept large bodies of troops collected together would have been both an aimless and a useless arrangement, as it would have left the enemy at liberty to range fully over large areas. . . ." and would have failed either to pro-

tect the peaceable districts or to allow the revenue being collected.⁶²

We can easily spot in this very lucid description a classic anti-insurrectionary strategy. The whole situation, indeed, very rapidly dissolved itself into a task of having to combat guerillas throughout the country. Sheer weight of numbers, which the British possessed, was not sufficient, and though the troops under General Prendergast's command came to be doubled within a year by reinforcements from India, it did not help matters. This was precisely because of the typical hit and run tactic adopted by the rebel hosts. We thus learn that—"In the numerous encounters described in the reports of the military authorities it will be observed that the armed bands, though sometimes very numerous, almost always acted on the defensive, and were generally put to flight without much difficulty or serious loss on our side. But such bands by being momentarily dispersed, are not finally dispersed off. The disintegrated atoms readily combine into a mass again. . . ."⁶³

Even in this early phase of the counter-insurgency operations, the degree of popular support was clearly perceived. For instance, in October 1886, it was noted that "Some of these leaders, notwithstanding their deficiency in courage and self-sacrifice, seem to possess considerable influence on the people. . . ."⁶⁴

A convenient starting point for any discussion on the extent of popular support behind the resistance movement could well be the extent of territorial control the two sides enjoyed at a given time. Thebaw's kingdom had become part of the British empire on January 1st, 1886. Ten months later, H. T. White, Secretary for Upper Burma to the Chief Commissioner, wrote, "Briefly, we hold and administer the whole country adjacent to the Irrawaddy on both banks from Bhamo southward to the old frontier line. On the east of the river, with some important and daily diminishing exceptions, we also practically administer the whole plain country, from the Irrawaddy to the Shan hills as far South as Meiktila. From the latitude of Meiktila southward we administer the country west of the parallel of the Pegu Yoma ; but east of that parallel we hold the country only within range of our posts. On the west of the Irrawaddy, besides the country, lying along the river bank, we occupy and administer almost the whole of the inhabited country between the valley on the left bank of the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy south of Pyinzala ; and we occupy two military posts on the Chindwin above Alon. On the 1st October

we held 79 military posts besides 22 posts garrisoned by trained police.”⁶⁵

Among areas not under effective control were large tracts of Mogaung to the north of Bhamo, including the jade and amber mines country. Adjacent to it was a vast expanse of unexplored waste and forest country extending to the borders of China and including the Upper Chindwin. The Shewegu township on the left and the Mohnyin township on the right bank of the Irrawaddy, south and west of the Bhamo district and nominally a part of it, were beyond effective control. The Ruby Mines tract, north of Mandalay, and a small hilly part of the district where the Shans lived, were still beyond British aegis. Further, whole of the country west of the Katha district up to the borders of the Chindwin valley,—which included the quasi-independent state of Wuntho, and the northern part of Pyinzala—to the north of Shwebo—were yet to be occupied. Almost the whole of the Chindwin valley, north of the Alon township, was only nominally under British administration. The southern part of Ye-u district, and the tract at the junction of Ye-u, Chindwin, Sagaing and Shwebo lay under a powerful “dacoit” leader, Hla U. Almost the whole country between the Arakan hills, the Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers, and the old frontier line between Upper Burma and Lower Burma,—except a comparatively narrow strip on the banks of the two rivers—was either unoccupied, or in the hands of dacoits or rebel leaders. And, on the east bank of the Irrawaddy,—small isolated parts of the Kyaukse district and one small tract between Kyasukse and Ava continued to be unsettled. Another small part of Ava district bordering on the Myingyan was not yet quietened. The eastern part of Myingyan was still “harrassed” by a “dacoit” leader—Yan Nyun; and in Pagan the comparatively small tracts of Se, Popa, Shawdawdaung, Nyaungok and Pindale were “disturbed”. Except the northern part of the Yamethin district, about Wundwin and Meiktila, which was controlled by the British, the whole of the Yamethin and Ningyan districts lying south of Kyaukse and east of Pagan and Taungdwingyi, were still unsettled and dominated by rebels.⁶⁶

So much for Pax Britannica.

It can be reasonably postulated that such an expansive territorial control implied a substantial popular support for the rebel cause. The same may not be necessarily true for the imperialists whose superior military force can well explain their domination in specific sectors. Numerous instances can be cited from military reports about the frustrating behaviour of

the people who obstinately refused to cooperate with the Government forces. Consider the following from Carter, Deputy Commissioner of Mandalay, on his experience till September 1, 1886: "I can find no instance of any real assistance rendered by the people in breaking up gangs of dacoits, we have had to trust entirely to ourselves."⁶⁷ The Commissioner of the Central Division, Fryer, wrote about the same time "I have honestly seen nothing that I can call an indication that the people appreciate our rule. They certainly appreciate peace and quiet, but they appreciate this less than most races, and our rule has not conferred much of it here."⁶⁸ This particular officer went on to say how on occasions people aided the Government troops in their operations against the insurgents. But this seems to have occurred only when troops were present in substantial strength.

Thus, the Commissioner of the Eastern Division observed "The people are all armed with *das*, but will not resist even very weak parties of dacoits; and till they try to help themselves it is impossible for the military or the police to ensure their safety. If the dacoited villages would give prompt information and act as guides in following up the dacoits, something might be done, but they are apathetic."⁶⁹

A case can be made out to the effect that the people helped the rebels only because they did not receive proper protection from the Government. Captain Eyre, Deputy Commissioner of Pagan district, thus noted: "All Burmans tell me that if we press the dacoits and rebels so closely as to scatter them and drive them about in parties of four and five, the villagers will readily capture and give them up in hope of future peace and quiet, as they are thoroughly sick of being alternately looted by the dacoits and threatened by us for failure to give information."⁷⁰ It would seem, therefore, that what mattered was which side was present where and in what strength. This was precisely the complaint that the head of the Buddhist Sangha voiced in an interview with the correspondent of the London Times on May 7, 1887: "It is impossible for the (British) Government to keep rulers (*sic*) in the small villages, and the dacoits of course cannot rule even a small village, so the poor villagers are between two, the soldiers and dacoits.

"...The dacoits enter a village without asking permission they stay as long as they like, they take bullocks, food, and money by force, and then go away. In a short time the soldiers having received information that dacoits are in the village, and that messengers have been going to the (rebel) princes from

that village, march upon that place, arrest a number of the people, and perhaps burn the village. Thus honest, quiet traders and villagers suffer from both sides and are unable to resist either."⁷¹

But it should be clear that what we see was a continuing war of attrition between two sides both of which used violence to maintain the loyalty and discipline of the villagers. Just as the soldiers arrested people and burnt their villages to keep them from cooperating with the rebels or dacoits, so did their enemy. Thus we learn from the Commissioner of the Central Division in September 1886 that dacoits of the Sagaing district systematically punish all persons giving information to the civil authorities. They had actually in the recent past executed three headmen and several guides for informing the authorities, and branded two other messengers on the forehead the very telling message: "Do not serve the English; do not show them the way."⁷² About burning of villages, we are told thus that of the 122 villages in the district of Western Myedu, by September 1886, 45 had been burnt by a number of dacoits.⁷³ On the other hand while we do not have any precise figure of villages burnt by the British troops, the news items in the London Times give us some idea.⁷⁴

The Government subsequently thus explained its stand: "...in March last stringent orders were issued that no village was to be burnt as a punitive measure. At the same time, authority was given for the destruction of villages which have been fortified and converted into dacoit strongholds and nothing more. These orders have been strictly enforced. This was, indeed, quite "in keeping with the humane and enlightened policy adopted by the Government of India in 1853, at the time of the pacification of Pegu."⁷⁵

An indirect pointer to the extent of popular support behind the insurgents could be had from the Government's attempts to disarm the population. Interestingly enough the principal idea was not so much to secure a general disarmament as to limit the possession of guns to the respected and the well-to-do. Thus, to start with, fee for licenses for sale of arms was raised from Rs. 10. to Rs. 50. Further it was decided that "...no free licenses will be given or renewed or maintained to anyone, unless the licensee is vouched for as a respectable person, unless his village has a good repute, unless the village is fenced in and made defensible, and unless the village contains a minimum number of guns."⁷⁶ The stress on the defensibility of the village was because in the past insur-

gents had armed themselves by seizing weapons from unresisting villagers. But more important than that was the Government's obvious hope that the well-to-do would rather stand by the empire than otherwise.

This point is further ramified if we are prepared to interpret the pro-Government attitude of particular villages along this line. Thus, it was noted by Fryer, the Central Division Commissioner, in September, 1886, that, "Against dacoits the people mostly defend themselves if they have what they consider enough weapons. . . Generally speaking, if a village has eight or ten muskets, resistance is made in case of attack by any ordinary gang of dacoits, say not numbering more than 50 or 30." Fryer claimed that such instances were "numerous", which may be doubtful, given what he himself says elsewhere. In any case, possession of eight to ten muskets in a single village can well be interpreted as showing preponderance of the more prosperous elements there, who could hope to benefit through the new regime.⁷⁷

A lot of things, of course, have to be left unexplained. For instance, we cannot say, who these gun-toting prosperous were. They may have been the village leaders themselves, the officials of the old regime; but then many of such elements were themselves providing leadership to the rebels,—uncertain as they were about their integration into the new structure. It is more likely that they were farmers or traders, rich enough to afford guns and to feel disturbed over the anarchic situation, but not actually so important to the old structure as to take up arms to defend it. It is not too difficult for us to visualise that such a contradiction may have surfaced between the old feudal elites (the later-day rebel leaders) and the new, rising farmers and traders (the later-day collaborators), given the fact that the crucial element in the crisis in Upper Burma before the imperialists actually moved in, had been the expanding control of the village leaders; the burden of their expansion may well have been resented by the relatively better off cultivators and traders in the villages.

Further research should be able to pursue this point in terms of class analysis of the rebel host. The Government, however, had its entire approach covered by another general dictum, which said "...license-holders are required to sell to no Asiatic without the permission of a Magistrate of the First Class and to report to the nearest Magistrate any attempt to buy arms or ammunition. . . ."⁷⁸ Surely, the authorities were not willing to take chances.

The popular base of the insurgents was in tact even two years after the formal annexation. The Officiating Commissioner of the Central Division, Captain Raikes, thus had to write on 24th March, 1888 : "I have myself visited so much of this tract as lies on the west of the Mu, and I have personally interviewed thugyis of all the principal villages in the tract east and west of the Mu. Military operations have been carried on against these dacoits during the past two years without success, and it is quite clear that so long as the villagers choose to harbour the dacoits and to keep them informed of our movements, they will remain at large, and every attempt to arrest them will end in failure."⁷⁹ More specifically, Carter, Assistant Commissioner of Pagyi, Central Division reported on 22nd March, that—"The Bos live in the jungles near certain villages and are fed, subsidised, and harboured by the villagers. The relatives of the dacoits live openly in their villages and act as spies on the movements of the troops and police (M)any cases have occurred in which thugyis and informers have been murdered for giving information about the dacoits to the authorities." Further, since the "nature of the country and the smallness of the bands render it almost impossible for military or police parties without the cooperation of the villagers to capture the dacoit leaders"—it was deemed "nccessary to take steps to enforce the assistance of all villagers to catch these Bos. . ."⁸⁰ Carter, therefore, went on to support vigorously two of Raikes proposals on the matter which reflected the subordinate officialdom's reading of a situation to which they were closest. According to Raikes : "It seems to me absolutely necessary to adopt such vigorous measures in the disaffected tract that the villagers will be forced eventually to surrender the dacoit leaders and to give up harbouring them and their followers." The villagers should be forced to surrender the relatives of the 'dacoits' through the village Regulation, and the relatives "should be sent as far as possible from Upper Burma and they should be kept under some kind of surveillance." This should reassure the potential informers among the villagers, but should it fail to do so, then "it is proposed to punish them (i.e. the villagers) by imposition of fines and, if necessary, by quartering punitive police in the different villages. . . ."⁸¹ Carter suggested that the fines should be Rs. 10/- per house per month as long as dacoits were not eliminated.⁸²

Clearly, all these reflected inversely the sway of the insurgents, their popular base. As the Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner commented on Raikes' proposals : "But

this is not practicable if, as I gather from your letter, they are very numerous.” He would rather that a proclamation be issued “naming all the villages which are known to harbour and aid the gangs and informing them that unless the members of these gangs. . . .surrender, and unless those who are not entitled to pardon are captured or killed before a given date, all the lands of the villages named will be declared Royal lands and will be assessed to revenue at the rate of one-quarter of the produce.”⁸³

And so it happened.

It should be clear that it was this support of the people that sustained the rebels against overwhelming British might. Consider, for instance, two major rebel leaders of the Central Division,—Hla U and Min O. The two in September, 1886, commanded 500 guns and 1000 followers, and 200 guns and 400 followers respectively. But as Fryer noted,—more than guns and followers, “their strength lies in their superior intelligence, mobility, and the excellent positions they occupy. . .” And, clearly much of that followed from their popular base.⁸⁴

Again with reference to Chindwin district in Central Division, Raikes noted that “The influence of the military posts at Alon, Mingin, and Kindat is only felt within a very small distance from each post. This is shown by the way in which rebels and dacoits frequently assemble and remain within a few miles of a large military post with impunity until a party is despatched against them when they almost invariably receive information in good time, and generally manage to escape before the troops get within striking distance.”⁸⁵

All these, understandably, produced some rethinking about military tactics involved in the counter-insurgency operations. The original plan, it might be recalled, was to have total control over a central core area around the Irrawaddy, the regions centering round Mandalay and Bhamo, and the land close to the borders between Lower and Upper Burma ; beyond this core,—to have a distribution of military posts, and above all to have flying columns which would rush to combat insurgents wherever they appeared. The guerilla-like mobility of the rebels was well appreciated as well as their ability to regroup after dispersion.

But old lessons had to be relearnt. Military posts had to be more numerous ;—even with minimal strength they had to be present everywhere. For, as Raikes rediscovered, British victories over scattered bands produced little tangible result. “The gangs of dacoits or bands of rebels thus disposed have

almost immediately reassembled elsewhere, and the effect of our victory in each instance has only been to temporarily frighten the enemy.^{86*}

Raikes, therefore, felt that : "troops stationed in considerable force at long intervals are unable to do anything beyond dispersing large bands of rebels. They undoubtedly have an excellent moral effect on rebels generally, but they are useless against small bands of rebels and dacoits ; they have the effect of preventing any very formidable rising in one place ; but they are ineffectual in other ways. I consider that the only way of pacifying the country is by establishing numerous posts, the force at each post being of small size, but sufficiently strong to protect itself and to operate against small bands of dacoits or rebels."⁸⁷ The summation of this line would be, as Fryer pointed out—to force the rebels gradually out of the settled regions. "As we advance our posts so the rebels must retire. We force them gradually further and further away from the settled parts of the country, until at last they are obliged to take to the jungles ; and being deprived of the means of subsistence, the rebels must surrender or return to their ordinary avocations."⁸⁸

The difference between the past and the present, thus, lay in the degree of penetration that was thought necessary to crush the rebels. It had been known before that "the troops should make their presence felt everywhere, and should remain long enough to establish civil administration on a firm basis, to inspire the people of the country with a feeling of confidence in the stability of our rule..."⁸⁹ But as experience showed, convincing the people required closer application of the Pax Britannica. More than strategic command over a region what was crucial was actual, physical presence. Fryer's observation was : "what is wanted is police posts spread all over the country. At present any village giving assistance to the Government is punished by the rebels when the troops have left. If a post is established in the village, it assures the villagers of protection, brings home to their minds the reality of our Government, and forms a nucleus round which the well-disposed can rally."⁹⁰

Ruefully Raikes observed,—“It is marvellous, when the enormous expenditure of ammunition is taken into consideration, that, the result should be so insignificant.”

III

It is important at this stage to try and find out about the leadership of the rebel host as much as about the rank and file. The co-relation between the two would go a long way to explain the popular base which we have seen so far.

One of the earlier discoveries by the British was that a large part of the rebel leadership came from the disaffected local officialdom of the pre-British State. As it was actually spelt out in the initial "Instructions to Civil officers in Upper Burma"—"In some districts of Upper Burma most of the thugyis have submitted to the British Government, but in places thugyis are still heading dacoit or rebel bands, and, by reason of their local influence, materially prevent the pacification of the country." Further, it was aptly observed that, "A District officer who is able to re-establish the majority of the old thugyis in subordination to the present order of things, and to obtaining good new thugyis of local influence for vacant circles will have made the most important step towards restoring the district to order."⁹¹

It is understandable that the leaders led because their structure of authority was crumbling. As the Central Division Commissioner said in September, 1886—"the disturbances are undoubtedly fomented by designing persons who will lose power by the establishment of our authority."⁹² This is true, though it has to be appreciated that it was not merely a question of who held what post. Rather, the conception of authority was itself at stake, the old conception giving way under force to the new. The picture that the British had before them was that of a trend of continuous resistance emanating from the locality as against the centre, whether it was a centre that moved under imperialist pressure, or was under the direct control of the imperialists. An acute description of the situation comes from the Deputy Commissioner of Shwebo, writing in September, 1886: "The Burman...society is only emerging from a state of similar to that of the Heptarchy, when every town had its own ruler before the rise of Alaungpaya. All the towns of any importance are walled and were semi-independent. The unit of power is the thugyi...The Burmese Kings never thoroughly consolidated their power, and dacoity was the natural result."^{93*}

* Similar was the observation of the District Officer of Yamethin Eastern Division, Upper Burma: "Under the late regime each thugyi was a petty monarch, and what happened outside his juris-

It was, therefore, only to be expected that among the rebel leadership there should be elements who had been up in arms against the Burmese Court. Thus we have in Mandalay men like "Nga Chin of Kyauko village. This man has been a dacoit all his life. Not many years ago he was arrested, but released by King Thebaw on the recommendation of the Ekkaba Wun, and appointed Yazawut Ok of Amrapura. On our taking the country he joined the rebels, and gave considerable trouble in his district."⁹⁴ Further, "Nga Kyaing, ex-thugyi of Tadaingshe, has, according to report, always been a bad character. This man works with Bo So, and is responsible for several of the dacoities committed in and around Amrapura : he has no regular following." Bo So himself was "ex-thugyi of Tamosoko. This man has given more trouble than any other of the dacoit leaders. Tamosoko has for many years past been notorious as a village disaffected to any rule." The imperialists swung into action against all these men ; Nga Chin disappeared as did his trusted lieutenant Lon Chit of Ledaw village, and Bo So fled to the Shans.⁹⁵

Given the highly decentralized nature of the pre-British structure, it should be clear that the rebel host remained scattered and disparate. Any central leadership formally exercising coordination of movement does not seem to have been there. Yet in terms of the position held in the pre-British structure perhaps several strata of leadership may be identified. And there first in order would be the princes of the royal family who came forward either to lend their talent, or at the least, their names to various contingents. The last independent Burmese monarch Thebaw had imprisoned several of them ostensibly because they had been his rivals. Subsequently, the imperialists released them

diction was no concern of his. Report of foraging parties of rebels having looted villages or of dacoities committed are often brought to me with the remark that the thugyi followed them up to the end of his jurisdiction, and asking leave to go into the next jurisdiction, which is of-course granted, and often followed by recovery of cattle and arrest of men, whereupon a complaint is lodged by the thugyi into whose jurisdiction the trespass has been committed. It will take time to eradicate this feeling and to make them understand that we are all subject to the same Government ; and that all petty jealousies must be sunk for the public good." From De La Courneuve, to the Commissioner, Eastern Division, 9th September, 1886, Home Dept. (W.B.) Public, January 1887, Prog. No. 40.

after annexation but only to their regret. A reward list had to be announced for their apprehension which gives us a fairly good idea of the importance the imperialists attached to these leaders. We thus have Rs. 3000/- for Teik-tin Hmat, Rs. 2500/- for Maung Thin, Rs. 2000/- for Myinzaing, Rs. 1500/- for Teik-tin Yana-aing, Rs. 1000/- for Teik-tin Zanbaing.⁹⁶ As it turned out, however, Myinzaing came to pose certainly the greatest threat. As the local correspondent of the Times reported on July 19th, 1886,—“In the opinion of those best acquainted with the province, a sufficient force ought to be concentrated to crush the rebel Prince, who is harassing the outskirts of Mandalay. Until the Myentzein Prince (same as Myinzaing) is captured or driven from the country there will be no hope of general pacification of Upper Burmah. The Myentzein Prince is accepted by the majority of the Burmese as a representative of the House of Alompra. That he has been allowed to maintain himself in force for several months within a few miles distance of Mandalay, holding a Court, using the White Umbrella, and flying the peacock flag—the symbols of the Burmese Royalty—has had a most disturbing and injurious effect on the people, not only of Mandalay, but of the entire country.”⁹⁷

It has to be understood that here we perceive what may be called some kind of organizational framework. As far as we know royal insignia were not commonly used by other insurgent leaders or even by other princes. In a subsequent explanation on The Times report, the Government admitted that ‘dacoits’ who infested the region around Kyaukse “professed to be his partizans”, even after British troops had successfully curbed the Prince’s activities.⁹⁸ In all probability it does seem that for a time the Prince came to assume the overall command over a fairly large area around Mandalay. However, it is also clear that he was in fact little more than figure head. He was only 17 (14 by The Times) when he died early in August, 1887, and his affairs were then said to have been managed by two uncles of his wife.

As the official note said, Myinzaing “was a younger son of Mindon Min by an inferior wife. Soon after the occupation he escaped from Mandalay and raised the standard of rebellion. As invariably happens in Burma, the Prince’s name attracted some following ; and he at one time dominated, more or less, the country beyond the hills east of Mandalay and southward across the Myitnge towards Wundwin. Early in the year he was forced to leave Zibingyi, which is 20 miles from Mandalay and the nearest point to which he had ever been able to come ; a little later he was turned out of Yakaingyi, beyond Kyaukse, and 50 miles

from Mandalay on the other side of the Myitnge river ; in February a post was established at Kyaukse, and the Myinzaing Prince was cut off from his adherents in the north." The Prince died in the little border state of Ywangan where he had then taken shelter. The note concluded : "Although it is not true that the Myinzaing Prince was at the head of anything like a popular or national movement, or that all the other insurgent leaders professed to be fighting in his interests, yet it is the case that he was an important potential centre of disaffection, and that many rebel chiefs even in distant parts of the province professed to be fighting on his behalf."⁹⁹

Apart from Myinzaing and other princes whose names occurred in the official list, names of several other scions of the royal line were off and on mentioned in military reports. Maung Thein (or Thin) who was on the list, provided leadership, with his brother—Maung Hmat Gyi, to the rebels in the Shwebo district for sometime. They were the two sons of the heir apparent to the defunct throne.¹⁰⁰ We also hear of the bands of Chaung-gwa Princes in and around Ava,—which were dispersed by January 1887.¹⁰¹

Beyond this patently blue-blooded circle we are told of a number of so-called pretenders. Who they in actuality were, it is difficult to find out. But given the fact that their 'pretension' was at least good enough for their followers, it may be postulated that they were descendants of houses rival to that of the late King. Of them,—Thin Kayaza was active for sometime around Set-kyatung in Myingyan.¹⁰² Between Pagyi and Pakangyi, south of the Chindwin at Kanle, was operating even in early 1887,—Shwe Gyobyu. On the eastern side of the Chindwin were about the same time formidable gatherings under "the *soi disant* Princes Buddha Yaza and Thiha Yaza and the Kyinmyin or Kyinmyindaing Prince." As the report said—"Buddha Yaza and his brother Thiha Yaza are said to be obscure persons from Pin, in the Pagan district, who lived for many years as Pongyis at Henzada, in Lower Burma. On the breaking out of the war they returned to monastery where they had formerly lived at Nyaunggon near Yanaung, in the Yamethin district. Thence they had emerged as leaders of dacoits, and have given much trouble in Ningyan and Yamethin. The Kyinmyin Prince is a man of less influence", and by January, 1887, his power was reported to be on the wane.¹⁰³ On 1st September, 1886, it was reported that Buddha Yaza was commanding some 400 men near Kanhla in Ningyan.¹⁰⁴

In the next grade of leadership can be lumped together the

Wun (Governor)—downward officialdom who formed their own contingents and kept up a continuing war of attrition. The specific relationship between these 3 strata we do not know, nor can we know much about the relationship among the leaders of each stratum. The chiefs must have cooperated with each other against the British from time to time, but for the most part they appear to have remained scattered and isolated. In October 1886, we learn that Bo Swe and Oktama, the former Pongyi, had successfully formed a team against the Government forces. "Till these two leaders are disposed of, the Minbu district will not be reduced to order."¹⁰⁵

Bo Swe, we understand, had been a hereditary thugyi of Mindat on the Thayetmy frontier. In 1886 we are told that he had been dominating for many years the western frontier of the old Thayetmyo district. Even before the British conquered Upper Burma he had been a menace from across the border, and British pressure had led several times to his "recall" to Mandalay, but then—only to be reinstated everytime to his post. He was said to possess great influence in Taungzin, the South-west corner of Minbu, and generally to dominate the western part of the district.¹⁰⁶

The episode of Oktama, with those of the brothers Buddha Yaza and Thiha Yaza,—all former pongyis, provide us with interesting pointers regarding the attitude of the Buddhist Church. About Oktama, we are told as late as in May 1888, that he has been for long in command of the Mon valley in the Minbu district. "During the rains of 1887 Oktama secured a complete hold on this part of the country. Since the beginning of the cold weather troops and police have been operating against him, but they have been unable to capture him or to completely break up his organization." The wrath of the Government naturally fell on the people of the region, so that by mid-1888 it could be said that—"There were indications. . . .that the people of the country who were assessed to heavy fines and were punished in other ways under the village Regulation for the assistance which they rendered to Oktama, were becoming weary of assisting the docoits."¹⁰⁷

This may be contrasted with the collaborationist line of the top ranks of the Church. The Tha-tha-na-baing or the Head (Archbishop, according to the Times report) thus had seen to it that his three nephews should be admitted into the English missionary school in Mandalay, run by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, within six months of the annexation of Upper Burma. The Archbishop was also happy to cooperate in securing

the surrender of the rebels in January, 1887. The result had been the printing of 500 copies of an amnesty Proclamation—dated 25th January, 1887,—half of which was to be distributed by the Tha-tha-na-baing and the rest by the Deputy Commissioners through the local pongyis.¹⁰⁸ Further, if we go back to the interview that he had given to the Times, a pragmatic collaborationist line becomes discernible. There was a clear recognition of British conquest, a fact that could not be denied. "This is now British territory, we know it well. The fact we cannot deny." And with that—"I have no fault to find with the British authorities in the matter of religion. They do not oppress us, but allow us to follow our own customs without hindrance. The Chief Commissioner and Col. Sladen have been to me, and I have given them what information I could."¹⁰⁹

The imperialists were not slow to appreciate the importance of the old ties between the erstwhile local level official and the insurgent people at large. On the question of appointment of new township level officers,—the Myooks, it was thus observed that : "As far as possible, Myooks and other officials appointed by Deputy Commissioners should be loyal Natives of local influence. We shall set the influential classes against us and we may alienate the people, if we appoint men from Lower Burma to many places of trust and influence in the Upper country." It was equally appreciated that such linkages between officials and the people did not follow mechanically from the offices—indeed, "Men who try to serve us incur odium and risks from a section of their countrymen. . ."¹¹⁰

But over and above the leaders were the people. What, in fact, strikes us very clearly was the massive participation of the civilian population, which renders it almost impossible to compute the strength of the individual groups operating against the imperialists. It may be recalled here that British officers reported that the extremely rapid collapse of the Burmese monarchy at the third Anglo-Burmese war had left the royal army virtually intact, and that it was this army which took up the struggle in the way of sporadic rebellions.¹¹¹ We do not know what had been the strength of that army, but given the fact that it was composed of the Ahmudans, i.e. one of the two major divisions into which the entire Burman population had been customarily divided,¹¹² we can well visualise it as something like a citizen's army which took to arms as and when the need arose, and then went back to peaceful avocations once the crisis passed. It is probable, therefore, that the insurgent leaders should always have had a substantial number of men from among the Ahmudans to do

something which was after all their customary occupation. This is, of course, not to suggest that the insurgents were all Ahmudans, the sources do not permit us to make any such categorical statement,—but only to emphasize that there had always been a tradition of something close to a citizen's army in Burma, a fact which must have been conducive to the growth of the guerilla spirit,—the easy communion between armed men and civilian population, and more than that, to the easy transformability of the one into the other. So even though we have a list of scattered names with figures, purportedly of their followers, we have still more names of leaders about whose strength we know nothing. What the Commissioner of the Eastern Division, Tucker, reported in August, 1886, about Mingyan, could well have been the truth about the whole of Upper Burma: "It is impossible to estimate the numbers of dacoits now in the district, or the strength of the various gangs, as, in addition to the professional dacoits, their bands are swelled by large numbers of country population, who join for an occasional expedition and then return to their fields. Recruits are often impressed, a certain number being demanded from each village in accordance with a regular system. Major Jenkins used to estimate the total number dacoits by which Ningyan was at one time threatened at three or four thousand, but their members constantly fluctuated. . . ." ¹¹³ This might well be when the people is at war, with some wielding the sabre and others following the furrow. As Tucker described: ". . . the north-west of the district, is actively hostile, most of the east in the possession of robber bands. The remainder of the district is very disturbed and much infested by dacoits. No part of the district can be considered quiet, and civil rule is practically confined to the town and cantonments of Ningyan." ¹¹⁴

Similar was the experience in Kyaukse district about the same time. ". . . Mr. Pilcher and Major Warner . . . found the country more disturbed and the resistance to our power more general than it was when they traversed the same ground about six weeks ago." For, in the meantime the "rebels have gained power, organisation and influence." The result was—"From village after village the male population turned out and joined the rebels. . . . Villages that were inhabited six weeks ago were this week deserted." ¹¹⁵

IV

How did the insurgents operate? Their basic strength lay in their guerilla like tactics, their rapport with the people at large,

their mobility, and in their effective intelligence network which kept them informed about the movements of the Government's troops. But sometimes they also had fortified posts or camps where they could take refuge. In July, 1886, we hear of a British expedition directed against the walled town of Yatha in Pynisala, Mandalay, which had been under insurgent control.¹¹⁶ Sometimes walled pagoda sufficed if the terrain was difficult enough.¹¹⁷ Bo Swe, the celebrated insurgent leader got the better of Mr. Phayre, the Deputy Commissioner of Minhla, from inside a walled pagoda. It was a pitched battle in which the British strength involved was some 50 sepoys and 50 military police, but this was clearly not enough and Phayre was killed.¹¹⁸

Incidents like this proved that in certain areas or pockets, the rebel forces could afford to go in for positional engagements on the basis of superior fire-power or numbers.

It would have been well if we could examine the internal workings of a rebel camp. In the earlier phases of the struggle, that is, in the days before the third Anglo-Burmese War, in Lower Burma, rebels sometimes set up fortified camps, deep in the interior of wooded terrain, which were as large and as well organised as small towns.¹¹⁹ We do not hear of such large scale camps after the 3rd war, may be because in this, by far the most intense period of rebel activity, the rebels were trying to operate from as close to the people as possible. However, some scattered descriptions are sometimes found. For instance, when a number of Shans,—aided by Burmese insurgents, revolted close to Akyab, a camp was discovered and described by British troops. They found "sheds had been made all round, and cooking was going on, and it looked as if the dacoits intended to make the place their headquarters. It was admirably situated, with a safe retreat up a road over the hills and plenty of good water. The place was covered with baskets of wool, paddy, rice, clothes . . . &c., of every description. We collected these together and set them on fire . . ." What is even more interesting is that subsequently the troops went on to discover that women and children sometimes accompanied insurgent groups, mostly wives and other relations of the men.¹²⁰

An important question that raises itself in our discussion is to what extent the insurgent groups were involved in or related to the hike in the rate of ordinary crime in this period. It should be understood that such a high crime rate was an integral part of the insurgent process. This was tacitly admitted by imperialist officers when they referred to almost every single group operating against them as 'dacoits'. After all, it has to be appreciated that

it depends on how one looks at law breaking as such. When a group looted a village that had submitted to Government forces, to the latter it was certainly nothing less than a violation of legitimate order. To the "dacoits", this legitimacy itself was not acceptable, its violation therefore being legitimate.

Yet, it does seem that some of the British officers were able to discern between what they called "national movement" and ordinary crime. It appears that as long as the insurgents dominated a sector, national movement or the politico-military struggle against the imperialists got more prominence in the insurgent activity. But as and when the insurgents were dispersed by Government troops,—sporadic dacoity in the sense of ordinary crime increased. About Shwebo it was reported in September, 1886, that "But for the north and the extreme south the district is fairly well in hand. This may be gauged by the way in which the sporadic cases of dacoity committed by small bands have been dealt with. This sporadic dacoity is really a proof that the bigger bands have broken up, and they show that the dacoits have abandoned all attempt at national movement. . . ." ¹²¹ But then, one has to remember that in the days before the British take-over dacoity had been very much a part of the resistance of the locality towards the expanding centre.

Clearly, domination by the rebels in a given sector also implied relatively greater solidarity within the rebel group and to that extent greater control for the rebel leadership. There are instances of this. In August, 1886, when Buddha Yaza controlled almost entirely the Taungnyo township in the north-western part of the Ningyan district it was said that he maintained a fairly good order within it. Most of the thugyis were with him, which helped. As Tucker reported. "This part of the country is now entirely under the control of Buddha Yaza who, while he levies men and money from the people is, I believe, able to maintain internal order and check inter-village dacoity." ¹²² Understandably this became difficult when the rebel group suffered pressure and dispersion, though some of the groups, we are told, showed remarkable perseverance and clarity of purpose even in the most difficult circumstances. By September, 1886, the rebels in the Sagaing district, Central Division, were themselves, more or less, subdued, and problems were being posed by raiding parties from the neighbouring district of Shwebo. Yet, the Sagaing rebels could be very systematic in meting out justice to the collaborators. Some of the leaders, like Nga Mya, the thugyi of Inkoka in Ye-U district, Central Division, won the grudging admiration of their enemies for their continuing opposition. Porter, the district officer, com-

mented : "He proved himself in a failing cause an indefatigable and capable leader, and after every defeat, sufficiently decisive to have disheartened any ordinary man, he rallied his followers and continued to oppose us."¹²³

Over and above the behaviour of the individual rebel groups, a case, therefore, has to be made out on the general plane of the entire rebellion, that the principal aim of the rebel operation was certainly not simple plunder ; the large area they controlled militates sufficiently against such an argument. In fact, it can be shown that their chief targets were the collaborators, the means and avenues of imperialist extraction (witness the attack on the river traffic¹²⁴), the principal centres of the new state. It should be appreciated that it was the imperialist order of preference that determined the corresponding order of the rebels' hatred and enmity. If the imperialists planned to move from the core to the periphery, the rebels had to base themselves on the locality and then move against the centre.

Even on the plane of the particular a remarkable degree of correspondence can be discerned. Thus, if the imperialists showed a special preference for a particular consideration, the insurgents had to neutralize that. In their early days in Upper Burma, the British had made two tactical exceptions to their overall idea of dominating the centre and then fanning out : (1) Upper Chindwin had to be occupied to safeguard the European staff of the Bombay-Burma Trading Corporation ; (2) Kyaukes district had to be taken to safeguard a possible rail link with Rangoon.¹²⁵ On both these sectors, it can be shown, that rebel attention was concentrated.

The Corporation had over time centred its activities in and around Ningyan, in the south east of Upper Burma, and there in the latter half of 1886 rebel movement escalated sharply. The Corporation, as it was reported, was the principal moneylender in the area and had a large number of elephants mortgaged to them, which helped them in their felling operations in the surrounding forests. These elephants were often stolen, and as Tucker commented the "indebted owners" were "often at the bottom of the disappearance of these animals."¹²⁶ "The forests were not interfered with ; the B.B.T. Corporation began working them as usual, but were interrupted by most of their foresters joining the dacoits and by others being murdered. This Corporation have lately, by the permission of Government, brought up an armed levy of Karens and are beginning to be able to work in the different places, but notwithstanding they have had great difficulties to contend with. . . ." In June-July, again, a ding-dong battle had

ensured over the control of Lewe, some miles from Ningyan. In June the rebels clashed with Lt. Shubrick and his men, some ten miles north of Ningyan. By mid-July "Lewe fell into the hands of the rebels under Maung Huan, a forester."

"The whole district then rose in rebellion, and gangs of dacoits were found in most of the villages surrounding Ningyan." Raids were made on the town of Ningyan itself, and houses were attacked "within a few hundred yards of the police office." Major Jenkins regretted that "no part of the country can be said to be under control and settled administration, as no part is safe from the hand of the dacoits, and, with the exception of a few villages, I find that the villagers are more or less dacoits themselves." Well he might, with some 1200 insurgents moving around Ningyan on or about at September, 1886.¹²⁷

A nearly similar situation, as we have seen, was prevailing in the Kyaukse district.

V

An important element in the whole pattern of resistance was certainly the role played by the tributary states of the old Burmese Kingdom. These states seemed to have been largely autonomous in the old framework, the local chieftains being left free to run the internal administration of their units pretty much as they liked as long as they paid up the stipulated annual tribute. It does seem that, to start with, the British Government proposed to continue this relationship. It promised that "the Shan Chiefs will be treated as feudatory or tributary states, without attempting to bring them under any direct administrative control." It was hopefully noted that, "the Chiefs or Sawbwas, as they are called, appear willing to accept our supremacy and preserve order among their people in accordance with our wishes, provided we recognise their right and dignity of chieftainship, and abstain from quartering troops upon them, and we, on our part, are very glad to accept these conditions, for we have no desire to extend unnecessarily the sphere of our administrative responsibilities. What we mainly want from the Chiefs is that they should prevent their people from raiding in the territory under our administration, that they should abstain from fighting among themselves, that they should not enter into relations with any foreign Power, and they should gradually approximate to our standard of civic discipline."¹²⁸

There cannot be any doubt that beneath this pious proclamation lay a threat of future intervention to promote the imperialist

"standard of civic discipline." In fact, if we may understand that the feudatory states had been integrated to the Burman Kingdom on the basis of age-old customary ties, then we can see that the replacement of the latter by a new state was bound to disturb the old ties, and by that threaten at some future date the tributary entities themselves. Already preliminary surveys had disclosed precious sources of mineral wealth close to the tribal belt. Coal and petroleum were there ; the famous ruby mines could be approached more directly through the tribal area. The imperialists had also noted that till recently the trade with the Shan states formed an important element in Mandalay's commerce even though it paid a 200% duty ad valorem and it was hoped that with the abolition of the duties the trade would revive. Steamer services were warming up on the Sittang, Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers and the construction of the Toungoo-Mandalay railways had started. Part of the railways was to run through Ningyan and Yamethin districts and the tracts along the base of the Shan hills, which were, incidentally the most disturbed country in Upper Burma. Rebels pushed out from elsewhere concentrated here, assured by the non-committal neutrality of the Shans ; and the Government of India declared that the railways were "a potent means of pacifying the locality and the best way of opening up portions of our new territories. . . . Moreover, this Railway will give us a necessary security against possible incursions from the Shan Hills to the east" ¹²⁰

All these may well have appeared to be too ominous to be ignored by the feudatory units. Besides these features might have already irreparably damaged the old ties and thereby created sufficient grounds for fear to the Shans. Trade was dwindling through the crisis that preceded the annexation, and it is reasonable that greater disruption was anticipated. Nor can we ignore the acute political uncertainty which resulted from the collapse of the old structure.

This is the perspective in which we need to look into the tribal attitude towards the British.

First in order of importance among the feudatories appears to have been the semi-independent territory of Wuntho. The land was rich and supplied the surrounding country with the necessary staple. The young Sawbwa who ruled it was not actually being hostile, but neither was he overtly friendly, a line of action which encouraged others to remain aloof, if not hostile. As it was reported in August, 1886 : "Ever since we occupied Tigyaing and Katha, the attitude of the Wuntho Sawbwa has been a source of anxiety to our officers." And with that—"The riparian villages on

the Irrawaddy do not, it seems, produce enough rice for their own consumption, and both sides of the river appear to depend on supplies from Wuntho."¹³⁰

The latter point was sufficient to ensure British interest in Wuntho, but there was more to it. "The Wuntho Sawbwa . . . has strengthened the fortifications of Wuntho and has prepared an asylum for himself 40 miles to the north of his home ; he is said to have levied troops and to have made advances to the Chinese Viceroy of Yunnan ; and parties of Wuntho men have joined the dacoits and rebels in the Ye-u, Shwebo and Katha districts, while standards bearing the name of Wuntho were taken, and Wuntho men were captured from the dacoits at Taze in the Ye-u district some months ago. The Sawbwa himself as yet committed us no overt act of hostility (sic). Still he keeps entirely aloof. Under present circumstances, we cannot hope that he will pay revenue due from him ; he is the most influential Chief on the right bank of the river ; his attitude sets an example to other Chiefs and leaders, and contributes to keep parts of Katha, Bhamo, Mogaung and Shwebo in ferment. Until he submits, or is overcome, these districts will not settle down . . . It is hoped that the Sawbwa will submit without any use of force on our part . . . It is altogether undesirable that we should be compelled to attack any Shan Sawbwa, carry war into his country, and subvert his power. But something of this kind will have to be done in Wuntho, unless the Sawbwa submits in December or thereabouts."¹³¹

Obviously, the British had not as yet made up their mind, and the pressure towards some sort of intervention was all the time building up. We may look into the case of Momeik and Mohlaing as an instance of an explorative thrust by the imperialists. These two Shan sawbwaships lay on the Shweli river, to the east of the Irrawaddy. Momeik, the bigger of the two, incidentally, was important to British considerations as it lay closer to the Ruby Mines, and actually supplied rice to that area. Shortly after the annexation, Kan Hlaing, son of the late Sawbwa of Mohlaing and apparently the ruling Sawbwa, "obtained from Deputy Commissioner an order addressed to him (by mistake as it now appears) as Sawbwa of Momeik." On the basis of this, as it was reported, this man went on to challenge the authority of the rightful Sawbwa of Momeik—a 5-year old child—the result being a futile unquiet period of 7 months in the region. Interestingly enough, the British Government thereafter caught hold of Kan Hlaing and pensioned him off with a small allowance in Katha. The pretender had failed, and so after this, understandably, a letter was "sent to the Momeik authorities telling them what has

been done ; informing them that we do not want to disturb their arrangements, but we require them to keep the peace." For, after all, "the good-will and cooperation of Momeik is important to us, because the Ruby Mines are near while part of the road to the Ruby Mines lies in Momeik territory."¹³² If the pretender had succeeded direct supervision would have been easier and more certain. But since he failed the "mistake" had to be admitted and relations squared up with the ruling family.

We may also look into the attempted setting up of Shan Confederacy as another instance of the political duel between the British and the feudatories. In October 1886, it was thus reported that some of the eastern Shan states were thinking in terms of building up a Shan Confederacy. This is also one instance where we may clearly perceive the connection between the erstwhile Burmese Court and the feudatories in trying to build up a joint front against the British for the man under whose mantle this confederacy was proposed to be set up was the Limbin Prince, a son of the former heir-apparent to the Burmese throne.¹³³

We also hear how but for the incursions of the Shan and Burman "dacoits",—Mandalay district might have been considered well settled in September 1886. As Carter said —". . . .I am confident that when these Shans have been successfully dealt with, the district will be quiet. Even Bo So, who has, I think more influence than any other dacoit leader in the district, would be helpless without the help of these men."¹³⁴

Of a similar nature was the Shan activities in Ningyan district of the Eastern Division. About the same time it was reported that, there, in the township of Kanhla and elsewhere in the north-east, large bodies of Shans were on the move against the Government troops. Further, that they were actually in command of the area between Ningyan and the Shan and Karen country, and were in some communication with the arch rebel Buddha Yaza.¹³⁵

The State of Wuntho continued to be a source of irritation to the imperialists till the early months of 1891. The official comment was—"The Sawbwa had always maintained an attitude of reserve and distrust and had little communication with our officers. Dacoities and robberies were constantly committed in British territory by gangs from Wuntho. The Sawbwa allowed his territory to become a standing refuge for rebels and dacoit leaders and, though he occasionally, when pressed took steps to prevent the attacks of individual dacoits and paid more or less reluctantly the fines inflicted upon him on account of border outrages, he never showed himself either willing or able to maintain order in his territory."¹³⁶ Then in February, 1891, started a series of epi-

sodes which turned out to be the last flicker of resistance before imperialism decided to extinguish the autonomy of that State.

This was, in fact, quite symbolic of the success that "pacification" now came to achieve in Upper Burma. Thus, while in early 1887, in Upper Burma, 142 posts had to be held by troops and 56 by the military police, by the end of that year, the numbers were 84 and 175 respectively. At the beginning of 1888-89, they were down to 41 and 192.¹³⁷

Pax Britannica was well on its way.

The question that still remains to be answered, however, is how may we look at all these. Where are we to place them in the long story of Burmese nationalism? Attempt is, therefore, made in a final section to provide a model which may help us to locate precisely the struggle that we have talked of so far.

*The Perspective**

Freedom movements everywhere in the erstwhile colonial world have generally reflected the fundamental class divisions within their respective societies. This is understandable for freedom, or independence from foreign rule, have implied different things to different classes.

Apart from that, historians have also recognised differences between the so-called organised and unorganised politics.

A question that has to be answered here, is to what extent, if at all, the latter distinction tallies with the evolving class divisions of a society.

Broadly, in the colonial background organised politics have come to be identified with modern, city-oriented movements, led by formally constituted political parties. By its very 'organisation' we can say, such moves as made by these parties have a degree of ideology or political programme, consciously articulated, behind them. This has a number of important implications which should be clearly understood. Being city-based and led by formally constituted parties, organised politics generally began as an offshoot of the process of Westernisation that accompanied colonial rule. To start with, at least, therefore, organised politics remained the pastime of the new westernized elites, a product of the new society that was growing up in the cities under European control. People who led or took part in it at the beginning, learnt of nationalism as also about the whole gamut of 'liberal' and 'humane'

* This section was written before the subaltern thesis made its appearance.

values in the schools and universities of their colonial masters, and later on through direct participation in the government's administrative machinery. Like the colleges and universities, the administrative machinery was quite superimposed on the given society, and to that degree divorced from the millions beyond the cities.*

If this be the origin, organised politics became a different matter with time. With the increasing penetration of the colonial state into the body-politic of the colonies, the crisis for the people mounted, and a new generation of leaders came up from the established parties, who went beyond the role of H. M.'s Royal Opposition that their predecessors had played out. And it was for them to tap the undercurrent of popular protest that had flowed on independent of them in the interior. It may be postulated that the new leaders were 'modern', as opposed to just 'westernised', and because of their 'modernism', acutely conscious of the need to have mass support behind them. A conscious attempt, therefore, could be made to overcome the city-interior rift. Further, as the cities became focal points of an extractive industrial system, the urban middle and lower-middle classes became involved in fundamental changes which generated their own pressure. And that helped the new leaders to build up fresh bases in the cities.

But before that, the cities had been the suction points of the colonial octopus. Beyond them lay the million villages where the new state exercised its authority basically in two sphere : (1) extraction of revenue ; and (2) maintenance of "law and order." The one function depended for its success on the other. Before the cities became the scene of the new industrial system, it was there in the interior that the actual extraction of surplus took place. There was the consequent build up of conflict emanating from the displacement of the pre-colonial structure of production (with its complement, the method of surplus extraction), and of the politico-military machinery of maintaining the pre-colonial law and order.

It is important for us to grasp this, because subsequent historiography of nationalism in the colonies have generally succeed-

* It is true that, to suit their convenience, the colonial masters incorporated in their machinery, besides the new elites, feudal elements from the traditional structure. But that did not bring the new state any closer to the people. For, by that time, cradled and lulled by the security the colonial state provided them, and before that, taught the severe lesson of defeat, the traditional elites themselves had lost their organic relationship with the people. Indeed, they stood more divorced than their own masters.

ed in distorting this picture by its overwhelming emphasis on the birth and growth of nationalist politics in the cities. Nationalism appears from this brand of history as an experience absent in the colonies before the imperial masters taught the natives about it. We should understand that what the masters did was to shape a primordial conflict in a particular way. By providing for city-oriented infra-structural growth with the consequent coming up of a western educated professional class,—used to the idoms of 'modern' nationalism,—who could and did act as intermediaries between the people at large and the masters themselves, by providing timely concessions to demands of only a certain kind, they saw to it that leadership remained in the hands of the new spokesmen.

True, the city-interior dichotomy was not that between two water-tight compartments. Millions from the villages came into the cities to earn their seasonal or annual sustenance. But the nationalist idioms, or, more vaguely and properly, the political idioms, mouthed by the intermediary turned nationalist, remained English (or German or French) to them. It was not their language.

Yet the unrest, and even conflict, was almost perennial in the interior. Generally, they were described by the umbrella term of being law and order problems by the masters, and how right they were. For, the discontented and the restless there were actually revolting against a form of control and method of extraction (and that is, after all, what 'law and order' means) that was a hundred times more efficient by virtue of being modern.

We can say, it was a conflict of two different conceptions of authority, more than that—two different styles of doing things. For, the peasants in their fight were led by their immediate superiors of the pre-colonial local society. More specifically, the degree to which the erstwhile elites of the local society provided this leadership varied inversely with the extent of their integration with the colonial framework. It can be tentatively suggested here, that to the extent this leadership remained non-integrated, the peasant society reacted more directly against the encroaching colonial state. And, as the process of integration advanced, the cohesion of the local society weakened and protest became indirect and tended towards extra-political behaviour.

We must remember that the peasant's conception of authority in the pre-colonial state had conditioned him to certain expectations, which in turn had determined his specific position vis-a-vis the entire gamut of the then society ; further, it also determined

the class-relations within the peasant's own society. Imposition of a more efficient and, therefore, more exploitative imperial control changed all this. It was not just that imperialism stood outside the process of production and determined what should be handed over. It also decided how it should be handed over. We need only look into the emergence of production for market, the consequent process of forced commercialization of agriculture, the growth of rich tenant farmers, the thousand-fold multiplication of landless agricultural labourers, and so on, to understand what that implied in terms of changes in the interior. We may, indeed, speak of a collapse of the peasant's world-view.

But can we really identify all these with the unrest in the peasant world, when the peasant himself may not have been 'conscious' of them? Unlike in the city-world, peasant unrest, more often than not, lacked articulation. More correctly, the vehicle of articulation was a language we do not know. The peasants' consciousness can, therefore, at best be inferred, deduced but never defined. Even then, questions on implications stand up to thwart us. For instance, the narrow, localised outlook that have been identified in most peasant movements, have frequently led historians to deny nationalist value to them. We are yet to realize that the world of the pre-modern peasantry, moving towards a violent link-up with the world-market was still localised. It is for us to understand the logic behind their anger and their 'unconscious' refusal to bend their knees to the new masters. What is infinitely more important is to find out to what extent the peasant was actively conflicting with the interest of imperialism. They may have been all the time swearing by H. M.'s Government while beating the hell out of the local British magistrate, but, for all practical purposes, were they not making clear their refusal to do the biddings of the imperialists? Their 'ignorance' did not stop them from saying 'no'.

A question that may raise itself is—how far we can describe the attitude of the peasantry as little nationalism of a sort. The advantage of such a concept, of course, is that it underlines the united resistance that was offered at the local level, a unity which at critical points of conflict with a greater enemy may have overcome the internal class divisions. But it can be shown that almost everywhere in Asia in the pre-colonial local society, state authority reached downward through some sort of prebendalism or other, that presumed class-divisions. And the specific development of the later conflict with imperialism flowed from the class organisation of the locality in which it occurred. True,

when faced with the greater enemy, the colonial state, the peasant sought more than ever to preserve and retain the rapidly changing world around him with its old social ramifications. And here he did forge a link with his old superiors. But that has, over the years, proved to be only a temporary phase. As the upper rungs allowed themselves to be appropriated within the colonial framework, the peasant's world-view had to grasp the new facts of life and absorb the tendencies that would propel him to a new age. The peasant had to become modern.

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The archival materials are taken from the National Archives of India, New Delhi.

4

THE RAJ, THE CONGRESS AND THE BENGALI GENTRY 1880-1905

RAJAT KANTA RAY

The Indian countryside, dotted with human settlements of various types, presented crucial problems of control to the Raj, and of mobilization to the Congress. Viewed from the distance, the inhabitants of the rural settlements seem to fall into three broad social types : the respectable and landed classes, the peasantry at large, and the landless agrarian dependents. Surveying the struggle for support in the countryside between the Raj and the Congress in the period 1917-1947, D. A. Low makes the following broad all-India formulations :: (a) the landlords stood overwhelmingly with the British ; (b) the 'dominant' peasants in increasing numbers flocked to the Congress ; (c) the agricultural labourers did not matter in this struggle.¹ Such generalizations, while useful at a broad and abstract plane, fit local situations at particular moments but uneasily. Sumit Sarkar has shown how crucial the support of the Bengal gentry was to the spread of the Swadeshi movement in the countryside of Bengal, and how crucial the indifference of the peasantry to its collapse.² The phenomenon of gentry involvement in nationalist politics was not confined to Bengal, and to the Swadeshi era. The U. P. Congress in the 1930's mobilized a broad mass of peasants behind the Civil Disobedience campaign, but its rural leadership—as Gyanendra Pandey's work suggests—was drawn from the small landlords and the high castes.³

Yet the rural gentry and their relationship with the Congress and the Raj have not claimed the measure of attention from the historians of the nationalist movement which the subject deserves. Peter Reeves' study of landlord politics in U.P. is an important contribution.⁴ By and large, however, research in rural nationalist politics has concentrated understandably on the relationship between the Congress and the largest category of the rural population, i.e. the peasants. In the altering balance between the Raj and the Congress during the period of the two world wars, the

role played by the peasantry was indeed—as D. A. Low has suggested—crucial. But before the peasantry became an important political factor in India, there was a long period when political consciousness in the countryside was to be found mainly among a heterogeneous mass of ritually clean, literate and landed families of great or small means. To the beginning of the twentieth century, in so far as the machinery of the Raj and the organisation of the Congress sought rural contacts, the social level which they probed most thoroughly was this heterogeneous category of people stationed above the peasantry. This essay is an exploratory venture in this important area of investigation.

It seeks to explore the pattern of interaction between the Bengali gentry and the English-educated nationalist politicians in Calcutta in the period before the Swadeshi movement. As already noted, we do possess accounts of how the Calcutta leaders and their rural supporters interacted with each other during the Swadeshi movement. Sumit Sarkar and Gordon Johnson⁵ have provided us with revealing insights into the process. But our knowledge of how the government, the Congress and the Bengali gentry related to each other in late nineteenth century Bengal politics is limited. An exploration of these political relationships will give us important insights into why Bengal was so prominent in early nationalist politics, and why the British developed attitudes so openly hostile to the 'babus'. It will also throw light on the role of the gentry in the long-term struggle of the Congress and the Raj for the control of the land. Initially at any rate, the gentry were more involved in this political tussle than the peasantry, and they continued to be important to the bloody end of the game in 1946-47.

The Bengali gentry

The 'bhadralok', as the respectable land-based classes of Bengal were sometimes collectively referred to, have been the subject of much discussion among sociologists and historians, and need not detain us long. The first thing to realise is that it is an extremely diverse category, with many ramifications in town and country. The distinction between 'bhadralok' and 'chhotalok' in common parlance is no more precise than the parallel distinction between the 'classes' and the 'masses'. Indeed, who is 'bhadralok' and who is 'chhotalok' changes with the context, as an example from a Bengali novel will make it clear. The Kahars of Hansuli Bank, in Tarashankar Banerjee's well-known novel

Hansuli Banker Upakatha, are untouchable agricultural labourers bonded to the Sadgop peasants of nearby Janal. They call their Sadgop masters 'bhadralok'. But the Janal Sadgops, although ritually clean, are mere peasants to the Brahman gentry of Chandanpur. The Chandanpur babus are bhadralok to the Janal peasants; and the Kahars themselves draw out a distinction by calling the Chandanpur gentry 'babus' and the dominant Sadgop peasants of Janal 'mandals'.

We prefer, therefore, to use the term gentry, a category that excludes the likes of the Janal peasants but embraces the Chandanpur babus, who have landed property, modern education, and widespread service, business and professional connections. The view from Hansuli Bank is a distant view from which the babus of Chandanpur seem to belong all to the same privileged category; but the view from within Chandanpur reveals important differences between the greater and lesser families, and raging factions over points of local precedence. The fictitious instance is historically useful. It enables us to see why, from the point of view of the agrarian dependents and the peasants, the gentry do form a single category. They possess the 'gentility' which marks them out from the rest of rural society. At the same time, however, they are internally differentiated and riven by divisions to an extent that makes the distinction made by John Broomfield between the higher and lower class bhadralok inadequate to cover all differences.⁶ Clearly we are dealing here not so much with 'a status group' as with a particular type of society within the broad rural community. Nor is that society—the gentry society—confined to the rural community. It stretches increasingly in course of the nineteenth century into the urban and metropolitan world of the big towns and of Calcutta.

The diversity of the world of those whom the Kahars of Hansuli Bank identify as the babus is revealed in the following passage from 'The Lament of the Babu', written by the novelist Prabhat Mukherjee at the time when the Bengali gentry, influenced by the Swadeshi movement, began to substitute the prefix 'Shri' for 'Babu'.⁷

At one time (says the personification of the dislodged prefix 'Babu') I reigned over Rajas, zamindars and similar aristocratic people. Then gradually a democratic wind blew over the country and my kingdom stretched far and wide. All bhadralok who had any education or whose clothes were clean became my subjects. Only a few

England returned men did not obey my law. They subjected themselves to a foreign king named 'Mr.' brought from overseas. If somebody called them Babu, they would give vent to their wrath, even—I heard—at the risk of breach of the peace. But this did not bother me, because they were few in number After so many years of my reign, why have you turned against me in my old age? Who is this 'Shri' who—a rude young man from nowhere—is about to dislodge me from my throne? How has this upstart managed to seduce you?

The writer of the *Swadeshi* age makes a clear distinction here between three social types within the world of the babus: the landed notables of great wealth and aristocratic birth, the mass of the educated gentry and a small circle of highly Anglicized men who preferred the suffix 'Mr.' to 'Babu'. This diverse world—as the author notes—had expanded greatly on account of the spread of English education in the nineteenth century. The change was reflected in the way the Kahars addressed the Chandanpur gentry in Tarashankar Banerjee's chronicle. They had at one time called the Brahmans of Chandanpur 'thakurs' (divine beings) as befitted a sacredotal order engaged in ritual functions. But the Chandanpur gentry took to English education, relaxed the rules of ritual pollution and went far and wide in search of jobs in service and professions. From 'thakurs' they became, in the eyes of the Kahars, 'babus'.

The process was completed in the nineteenth century. The educational reorientation and occupational mobility of the gentry created an 'educated middle class' in Calcutta and other towns which provided the driving force behind the Indian Association, the executive arm of the Congress in Bengal in the late nineteenth century. It needs to be emphasized, however, that this 'educated middle class'—as the English educated Bengalis came to call themselves—remained tied to the land, to their ancestral village houses and their ancestral landed property. Thus the urbanized, Anglicized and educated leaders of the Indian Association retained substantial social ties with the Bengali gentry, and were—as Prabhat Mukherjee's caricature of 'Babus' turned 'Messrs' makes it clear—a group on the inner side of the fringe of that society. Another group within gentry society which had similarly distinguished themselves from the rest of the community were 'the Rajas, zamindars and similar aristocratic people'. They had their own political association—matching the Indian Association

of the 'educated middle class'. It was the older, and more oligarchical, British Indian Association.

The mass of the Bengali gentry, however, were lesser landed families with strong traditions of literacy and service. Settlement reports on the districts in which the Swadeshi movement gained greatest momentum—such as Dacca, Faridpur and Bakarganj—contain enough evidence to show that the diminishing rent incomes from their small landed properties were becoming increasingly insufficient to maintain these gentry families. The growing complexity of the land tenure system—especially in East Bengal—had given rise to an intricate set of sub-infeudated, subdivided and fragmented land rights. Fragmentation of landed properties, which had turned into hotch potch collections of shares in rent dispersed all over the country was steadily undermining the economic position of the high caste smaller gentry. The response to this economic pressure had in some respects been dynamic : a rapid spread of schools, colleges and English education in the gentry settlements in the countryside, the large scale emigration of men-folk to rural towns and administrative headquarters in search of employment, and the steady growth of the Bar in mofussil towns which became the radiating centres of country politics.⁸ The growing army of clerks, pleaders, petty officials, school teachers, students and unemployed young men spread discontent in the ranks of the Bengali gentry and set off among them an anti-white, neo-Hindu reaction by the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Mobility, mass and discontent were the special features which imparted a unique character to the Bengali gentry. Migration from gentry settlements in search of education and employment was exceptionally large scale in the late nineteenth century. The number of high caste educated families in these rural settlements—mainly of the Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya castes—was moreover unusually large compared to other parts of the country. The political consciousness developed to a degree not yet matched in the rural parts of other provinces. But this was accomplished by material dependence on the administration. The Bengali gentry, as John Broomfield has shown, thrived on the institutions created by British rule : modern educational facilities, bureaucracy, law and the legal profession, and so on. Consequently the political training and aptitude for participating in British administrative-constitutional reforms were highly developed among the Bengalis even in the mofussils.

One qualification, however, needs to be made here. Among the growing number of Bengalis employed in service and profes-

sions, there was forming in the late nineteenth century something like a lower middle class, closely related to the lesser landed families in the countryside. They were in no position to reap the rewards of such constitutional reforms. There were acute social jealousies and rivalries within the members of the educated community. An indigenous brand of nationalism, eschewing the method of successful participation in British institutions so characteristic of the Congress, began to develop in the late nineteenth century. The full logic of this development became clear only during the Swadeshi movement. But during the period under study, as we shall see, rumblings of this under-current could be heard during the agitations against the Age of Consent Bill in the early nineties.

Thus the highly educated Bengali nationalist leadership in Calcutta, organized in the Indian Association and controlling through it Congress affairs in Bengal, had several groups to reckon with among the Bengali gentry. These were the landed and titled notables, organized in the rival British Indian Association; the influential lawyers, landlords and professional men in the mofussil centres who dominated the key public institutions; and a great mass of less well educated gentry, both in town and country, who were finding it difficult to make ends meet. Opposed by the organized group of landed aristocracy above them and often criticized by the mass of the lesser landed gentry, clerks, petty officials and pice journalists, the urban leadership of modern nationalist Bengal had somehow to find networks of helpful contacts in the countryside to mobilize support for its agitations. It had one important political asset in the mofussils; a growing complex of several modern institutions over which the British had lost control and which were dominated by educated Bengali families.

By the end of the nineteenth century the number of privately owned schools and colleges had multiplied in the districts, the district bars had grown into highly influential and thickly crowded centres of opposition to the local administrations, and the vernacular press had penetrated to every gentry habitation. These were features unique to the Bengali countryside in the nineteenth century. In no other province had these modern institutional developments proceeded so far and so completely beyond the control of the district administration. As R. H. Craddock, the Home Member of the Viceroy's Council, later on noted, the special features of Bengali society—the numerous gentry settlements dotting the countryside, the rapid spread of 'inferior'

English education, and the constant political pressure maintained by the Bar and the press—had resulted in a steady decline of the power and prestige of the district magistrates in the province to a degree not witnessed in any other part of India.⁹

British reform and institutional politics

The British in the late nineteenth century made two important reforms—the local self-government resolution under Ripon and the India Councils Act of 1892. These two reforms went further in Bengal than in any other province, because special concessions were given by the British to the Bengalis. Moreover, the Bengal nationalist leadership used these reforms with marked success to consolidate their political position. These special features of the actual working of the reforms in Bengal were due to the strength of its political leadership and the support it could mobilize among the mofussil gentry.

The actual content of the reforms was shaped by a complex pattern of interaction between the Government of India and the Government of Bengal. The political discontent that had manifested itself in Bengal against Lytton's repressive measures was one of the reasons why Ripon wanted a more liberal scheme of administration in Bengal. The Government of Bengal under Ashley Eden and Rivers Thompson was not, however, sympathetic to his broad political vision. A sharp division between the two governments had appeared over Ripon's attempt to abolish racial discrimination by passing the Ilbert Bill. The Government of Bengal had come out in open opposition to the attempt to remove judicial discrimination.¹⁰ The division of opinion extended to the local self-government scheme which Ripon brought up at about the same time.

Ripon and his Council sought to impose upon the Government of Bengal a scheme which neither Eden nor his successor Thompson looked on with a kindly eye. The Viceroy and his Council on the one hand and the Lieutenant Governor and his Civil Service in Bengal on the other waged a behind-the-scenes battle on the issue. Rivers Thompson opposed the idea of a district board on the ground that it was likely to be composed of pleaders who had come down from Calcutta, of men in the education department sent there by the government, and of merchants who knew nothing beyond business. Such a board, he said, would be a talkative body, and would be disposed to call into question the action of the district magistrate. Many district magistrates shared this fear. One of them, Westmacott, went to

the length of stirring up an agitation against Ripon's scheme. He sought the help of the Nawab of Dacca to set up a counter-movement in his district in order to counter the popular demonstrations in favour of local self-government.¹¹ Thompson proposed a counter-plan to the Government of India. He suggested that there should be no district boards. Instead there should be a Central Board in Calcutta supervising the work of local boards in district subdivisions, which in turn would merely supervise the work of smaller local bodies and would not perform important functions on their own. The object was evidently to prevent any encroachment on the sphere of influence and patronage of the district magistrate and the subdivisional officer. 'The basis we wish to work upon', rationalized the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, 'has a much less ambitious aim. We should give over the petty affairs of villages and unions to minor and local bodies, who have local knowledge and local interests, and we propose that they should be supervised by the Local Boards to which they will be subordinate'.¹²

Thompson's scheme was structurally defective, because there was no mediating link in his plan between the Central Board and the minor local bodies. His proposals bitterly disappointed the educated Bengali gentry. They had been aroused by Ripon's self-government resolution to the expectation that district management would be made over to local bodies, district magistrates excluded from their internal affairs, and independence in local administration eventually given. The well-educated gentry residing in principal mofussil towns had nothing to gain from Thompson's plan. Under it, local boards were to be established not in the principal towns but in subdivisional headquarters where men of sufficient education would be few. A large number of educated people in district headquarters would find no adequate scope for work without district boards, since the local board at the sadar subdivision of the district would be too small an affair to attract them. In any case it would have no power.¹³

The educated Bengali gentry were saved from this disappointment by the Viceroy-in-Council and the Secretary of State. They ruled out the structurally weak idea of a Central Board and decided on district committees instead of a central body to supervise the work of local boards. They also disapproved of the extremely high franchise proposed by Thompson to confine the benefits of the scheme to the largest and wealthiest landlords, who could be counted upon to be loyal. 'I should not', wrote a member of the Viceroy's Council, 'be inclined to press Thompson

much on this point, but there can of course be no objection to pointing out to him any faults which may occur to us in connection with his proposals. The object of his policy is, manifestly, to exclude the "penniless, spouting University student", as Mackenzie calls him. Whether we like or dislike the typical Baboo, the fact of his existence has to be recognized. With the press growing every day, and with opportunities afforded everywhere to the "substantial men of business" to spout in their substantial way, is it likely that the baboo will not want to spout?¹⁴ Ripon wanted an educational franchise in addition to the property qualification since wealth was not the only test of fitness.¹⁵

Pressed by the Viceroy-in-Council, Thompson proposed that if district committees were going to be set up for supervising local boards, the district magistrate should in every case be the chairman of the board, as otherwise the committees would be likely to turn their attention from roads and schools to opposing the district authority under the instigation of professional politicians, who would utilize the position for 'purposes of a distinct political character and as an engine for the attainment and for the promotion of ulterior designs'.¹⁶ The Government of Bengal feared particularly 'what may be called the extraneous element of the district—the element which represents high education and political ambition, but not local knowledge or interest—the pleaders and schoolmasters, and other foreign residents at the headquarters station'.¹⁷ These anxieties of the Bengal Government were an unmistakable sign of the strength of political consciousness among the Bengali gentry, which marked the province out from the rest of the country at the beginning of the 1880's. The occupational and social mobility which the Bengali gentry had achieved by then had given rise to two types of respectable residents in the district and subdivisional headquarters: the local genteel families and the immigrants from other places in service and professional pursuits. The latter element acted as a solvent, and was regarded by the government as especially erosive of local political control. The officials feared that this element would get a grip on the proposed machinery of local self-government and erode their authority.

Playing down the interest aroused in Bengal by Ripon's scheme, Thompson wrote to Ripon: "Though some enthusiasm has been evoked since the Government of India's resolution was issued, it has been confined to a particular class—men who

have visited England, the pleaders at the Bar, and people generally who, though educated, have not much personal interest in the country. The Zemindars, as a body, I suspect, dislike it. The old-fashioned natives who look to the Government doing everything in the country would much prefer having the Magistrate to manage everything for them".¹⁸ It was true that in less advanced regions like the Chittagong division, the bulk of Muslim cultivators showed no interest in local self-government, and only the educated Hindu minority in civil stations, pleaders, officials and other educated men, very often inhabitants of other districts, took up the discussion of the subject. In the Munshiganj subdivision of Dacca, by contrast, the leading men of Bikrampur organized impressive meetings in favour of the scheme, attended by many Muslims and traders in addition to the educated Hindus. Bikrampur, it may be noted in this connection, was a homeland of well-educated petty landlord families of high caste, who had migrated in large numbers in service and professional pursuits.¹⁹ The gentry, whether local residents or settlers from other districts, mobilized well in response to Ripon's scheme.

At Ripon's insistence a provision was retained for appointing non-officials as chairmen of district boards in districts which were considered sufficiently advanced by the local government. In practice, however, the chairmen of district boards were invariably district magistrates until 1917, when a non-official chairman was first appointed to the district board of Murshidabad. In municipalities, on the other hand, the Bengali gentry got a wider opportunity for running local affairs, since under Ripon's scheme the municipalities were in many instances placed under elected Presidents. Even in district boards and local boards, placed under official chairmen, the elected members had some scope for managing funds, as the overworked district magistrates could not be expected to supervise all details of expenditure and as the growth of committees for transacting the increased volume of business meant the decentralization of fund control. No real self-government was allowed under Ripon's laws; only the power to manipulate with a limited amount of funds.

Even these limited powers aroused the keen interest of the local gentry. Statistics of the occupation of members of the new local self-governing bodies show that landholders and lawyers were numerically best represented in the local and district boards, and traders along with these two former categories had the most substantial representation in the municipalities. The

figures, however, give no precise picture of the real equations of power in these local bodies. The landed magnates of Bengal seldom stood for election to local bodies, and the large number of landholders present in these bodies were mostly, as the Secretary of the British Indian Association complained to the Government of Bengal, owners of a few bighas of land.²⁰ The lesser landed families, with extensions into the professions and trade, dominated the new bodies.

TABLE
Composition of Local Bodies in Bengal 1899-1900
(Pleaders & Landholders & Merchants & Schoolmasters)

	Pleaders & Mukhtars	Landholders & Estate agents	Merchants & Moneylenders	Schoolmasters & Doctors.	Govt. servants	Others
Municipalities	23.2	23.1	11.2	9.3	16.5	16.5
District Boards	21.9	32.0	—	—	31.2	14.9
Local Boards	27.9	43.5	—	—	12.1	16.5

Source : *Municipal Department, Municipal, Resolution Reviewing the Reports of the Municipalities in Bengal during the year 1899-1900* (Calcutta 1900), p.2 ; *Municipal Department, Local Self-Government, Reviewing the Reports on the Working of the District Boards in Bengal during the year 1899-1900*, p.2.

Not all municipal councillors were of course typical members of the gentry. But even for traders, money lenders and manufacturers among them, there was a tendency to push into the ranks of the gentry by purchasing landed property. The distinction will become clear if we look at the biographical details of two municipal councillors—one a typical member of the gentry and the other a new rich businessman turned landlord—who were fortunate enough to be commemorated in Bengali biographies in spite of being ordinary men with no political distinction. Jadunath Chatterjee (1838-1901) was the son of Ananda Chandra Chatterjee, a lawyer (mukhtar) of Krishnagar. Chatterjee senior was a Brahman, learned in Arabic and Persian. Jadunath learned English, passed the B.L. examination and became an established pleader in his home town, rising to the

post of government pleader of Nadia. He became Vice-chairman of the Krishnagar municipality for two terms and its Chairman for three terms. Here was a typical lawyer from a gentry family who dominated the municipal politics of his home town.²¹ A more marginal member of the gentry, but definitely much more wealthy, was Kartik Chandra Das (born 1851), a man of the Modak (sweetmeat seller) caste whose grandfather was a small sweetmeat seller of Santipur who rose to the ownership of a sugar mill. His father, Manik Chandra Das, although uneducated, earned great wealth in the sugar business, which he then invested in government securities and a zamindari yielding Rs. 4000 a year. He gave his son Kartik Chandra Das an English education in Santipur High School. The latter expanded his father's enterprises, consisting of two sugar mills in Jessore and Nadia and a big money-lending business, adding to the family wealth liquid cash assets and landed properties. He also extended the sugar business to Calcutta, where he opened two big sugar storages (arats). He became a nominated councillor of the Santipur municipality in 1887 and held this position for 25 years.²²

As one of the pitfalls of local self-government, the Government of Bengal had emphasized the communal tension between Hindus and Muslims as likely to lead to the failure of Ripon's scheme. An examination of the composition of groupings in municipal politics, however, makes it clear that conflicting caste and communal interest played as yet a secondary role to personal rivalries and alliances. Councillors exhibited a characteristic pragmatism which was instrumental in fostering plural factions to the mutual advantage of Hindus and Muslims, and of high castes and low castes. In Santipur municipality, for instance, the Muslim Rate-payers Association expressed the 'gravest objections' to the nomination of two hostile Muslims as Councillors by the government, accusing them of 'underhand dealings in the farming out of the skinning contract of dead cattle' and 'of taking "Benami" contracts in the Municipality'. This municipality had been taken over by the government for mismanagement, and only one among the six persons recommended by the Muslim Rate-payers' Association had been nominated Councillor by the government. Under these circumstances, the Muslim Rate-payers' Association, combining with some local Hindu politicians, prayed 'earnestly' for a reintroduction of the electoral system, although the ground on which the district magistrate objected to its restoration was that Hindus and Muslims in the town were divided.²³

Muslim councillors were in fact not too reluctant to sacrifice the interests of the great body of their co-religionists in alliance with Hindu councillors, as was proved by the Burdwan meat scandal of 1907. The city fathers of this municipality, both Hindus and Muslims, maintained in the centre of the city, a practical monopoly of meat shops, the meat being supplied from a single private slaughter house standing on the ground property of the Vice-chairman of the municipality, this being the only slaughter house licensed by the councillors. The decision to restrict the number of meat shops was unanimously taken at a committee meeting of ten councillors : five among these were Muslims, two being the Vice-Chairman and the President of the Burdwan Muhammadan Association. Upon complaint by the Muslim inhabitants of the town, the Lieutenant Governor ordered the opening of a second slaughter house, but the municipality openly defied the order.²⁴ The leaders of the Burdwan Muhammadan Association, such as Abdul Jabbar, Abdul Kasim and Muhammad Yasin, were prominent Congressmen, and were associated with local Hindu politicians as the dominant municipal group.²⁵

This kind of inter-communal factional alliance in municipalities and local boards was a symptom of the political domination of the gentry. The peasantry, which was predominantly Muslim and low caste, had not yet entered the arena of institutional local politics. The educated gentry was predominantly high caste Hindu, with just a sprinkling of Muslim families. Consequently the basic cleavages that were to appear with the attempt of the Muslim and Namasudra peasantry to end the domination of the gentry in the local bodies had not yet arisen.²⁶ The undisputed sway of the gentry in institutional local politics meant the import of the characteristic gentry rivalries in the municipal arena. Factional rivalry over points of local precedence was an old passion of Bengali gentry families : they had given it the highly descriptive name 'daladali'.²⁷ Leading gentry families with their dependents formed dals competing for precedence in the locality. High caste Brahmans were consequently seen entering into factional alliances with low caste Hindus and even Muslims, and low-born people, instigated by faction leaders or dalapatis, felt no fear in abusing gentry families of the opposite camp.²⁸ Such was the stuff of gentry-dominated country politics, and it formed the content of municipal politics as well when the gentry took over the local boards and municipalities. Competition at each municipal election tended to divide the country people more

intensively and on a wider basis into factions,—an indication of increasing politicization and sharpening of local rivalries which stood to the benefit of the Calcutta politicians seeking a means to stir up rural unrest in order to secure country support.²⁹ Significantly local rivalries were particularly acute in the big municipalities lying on the East Indian Railway and in close touch with Calcutta, 'the parties being divided upon purely personal lines rather than by any divergences of principle or policy'.³⁰

Thus gentry rivalries in rural towns and rural localities produced outward and upward linkages with Calcutta politics. The Indian Association used these linkages to mobilize support for its agitations and to win elections to the elective Legislative Council set up in 1892. Clusters of local political interests among the district gentry, led by district pleaders, were naturally drawn to the metropolitan centre, and the centre in turn made use of its magnetic pull for wider political purposes. The contacts which the talented political leadership of the Indian Association developed with prominent pleaders in the districts were especially significant in the development of organized modern politics in late nineteenth century Bengal. Surendranath Banerjee had connections with prominent district leaders, such as Ananda Chandra Ray of Dacca, K. B. Dutt of Midnapore, Baijunta Nath Sen of Berhampur, and Ambica Charan Mazoomdar of Faridpur. The 'pleaders' were the characteristic representatives of the Bengali landed and educated gentry : they 'pleaded' for the entire gentry, representing their characteristic aspirations, interests and sentiments and organizing their endemic internal rivalries. The bar and the pleaders in the districts were the nodal points through which the Calcutta-based Indian Association sought to rally the gentry and through them the country.³¹

The pattern of linkages between Calcutta and the districts were thrown into sharp relief by the India Councils Act of 1892. The Legislative Council of Bengal was reconstituted under this Act on the basis of the existing self-governing institutions and other organized institutional constituencies, which were given the right to elect members to the provincial legislative body. Since the local self-governing institutions were dominated by the mofussil gentry, and since the Indian Association had developed political connection through the district bar with the gentry, the Congress politicians did especially well in the elections from the local self-governing bodies to the Bengal Legislative Council.

It may be noted that while the Indian Councils Act of 1892 was meant to apply to India as a whole, its implementation in Bengal through official regulations under the Act was more liberal than elsewhere. The proportion of non-officials to officials in the Bengal Legislative Council was high and the constituencies were defined in such a way as to help the pleaders and the politicians so cordially disliked by British officials. Partly this was because of the unusual expansion of English education in Bengal, the rapid growth of the press, the bar and the local self-governing institutions, and the continuous political pressure maintained by the Bengal Congress leaders. But partly also it was due to the fact that when the regulations were being framed for the Bengal Legislative Council, liberal officials who did not belong to the usual anti-Bengali type were temporarily in charge of the Bengal Government. Sir A. McDonnell, a rare Bengal lover among the Civilians, was acting as the head of the provincial government while the Lieutenant Governor was away on leave, and his Chief Secretary was Sir Henry Cotton, a liberal official with known Congress sympathies. These two officials did not entertain the suggestions of the European and Anglo-Indian Defence Association regarding the implementation of the Act, as would normally have been the case.³² Under the regulations they framed, the elected members of the Bengal Legislative Council were to be elected from the Calcutta Corporation, the Calcutta University and the provincial municipalities and district boards. These were institutions dominated by the educated Bengali gentry with natural Congress sympathies.

Consequently, in the elections of 1893 five out of six men elected to the Bengal Legislative Council were 'Congresswallahs', four of them being 'England-retuned Babus' : W. C. Bonnerjee, Surendranath Banerjea, Lalmohun Ghose and A. Chaudhury, the fifth one being the Maharaja of Darbhanga, a contributor to Congress funds.³³ Not a single big zamindar of Bengal (Darbhanga belonged to Bihar) was elected. Nor did the loyalist landlord lobby, organized as the British Indian Association, improve its position in the subsequent election of 1895. In 1897 the Maharaja of Natore, a big nationalist landlord who did not belong to the inner circle of the British Indian Association, was elected, but this did not satisfy it. No member of the Calcutta landed aristocracy, which predominated within the Association, was elected to the Legislative Council between 1893-1898. Instead, 'pleaders' and 'politicians', with marked

affiliations with the Congress and the Indian Association, were elected in these successive elections.

Their base of power was the self-governing institutions and educational bodies (including the Calcutta Corporation and the Calcutta University), in which the big landlords had no controlling influence. Through these bodies, the Bengal Congress politicians ensured entry into the Legislative Council, successfully participating in liberal constitutional politics and excluding their bigger landed rivals of the loyalist type. The latter were handicapped by the strong antagonism of the lesser gentry families in the countryside, who were envious of the titled and landed magnates who lived in princely style in Calcutta. The material interests of the landed magnates and the petty landlords differed, and the vernacular newspapers repeatedly pressed for special legislation for the benefit of the lesser gentry, who—it was alleged—were much more hard hit by tenancy laws than the big landlords with larger resources.³⁴ Not that the 'England-returned' babus were too popular among the gentry families in the districts. But their political skills and all-India nationalist connections were appreciated, and as the only organized nationalist group in Calcutta they commanded support among the enlightened literate section of the rural population.

Political developments in the countryside thus steadily undermined the position of the once influential landed aristocracy. They were edged out of the representative system in which more and more powers were accruing. The British Indian Association was increasingly frustrated by these conditions and gave vent to its wrath against 'the reign of the pleaders' (*vakil raj*).³⁵ In 1898 the British Indian Association submitted a petition to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, complaining that the elective principle had led to the exclusive election of pleaders and barristers. The zamindars—the 'natural leaders' of the people—had been thrown into the shade.

The government, now back to its normal anti-babu tone, responded positively to this complaint. In 1901 it granted a seat on the Bengal Legislative Council to the British Indian Association. But this did not stop the irreversible political decline of the loyalist landlord lobby. Instead of proving a boon, the grant of special representation split the British Indian Association right down the middle. The split took place along a pre-existing line of cleavage within the body.

The British Indian Association was controlled by absentee

landlord families settled for generations in Calcutta. Among its 144 members in 1900, 77 were Calcutta residents and 67 were mofussil zamindars.³⁶ The latter carried even less weight in the Association than their numerical strength warranted because they could not attend its meetings regularly and therefore could not serve on its Committee in sufficient number. Leaders of the Calcutta landed aristocracy, such as Maharaja Sir Jotendra Mohun Tagore, who was trying to get his son Pradyot Kumar into the Council, and Raja Peary Mohun Mukherjee, who had a similar ambition for himself, had been pushing the claim for a special seat on the Council since they had no chance of securing election from another constituency. Now that they got their desire, they found in the mofussil zamindars a potential obstacle to the election of Pradyot Kumar Tagore or Peary Mohun Mukherjee.

To get round this obstacle, they resorted to the ingenious tactic of knocking off from the roll of members of the British Indian Association the names of mofussil zamindars who had failed to pay their subscriptions in time.³⁷ The rumour went round the city that members who were thought to be likely to vote for Tagore were being retained on the roll even when they were themselves in arrears.³⁸ In protest against this arbitrary action, some big mofussil zamindars took the lead in a secession from the British Indian Association. Two nationalist zamindars, Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandy of Kasimbazar and Maharaja Surya Kanta Acharya Chaudhury of Mymensingh, formed the Bengal Landholders' Association. The *Hindoo Patriot*, the organ of the zamindars, lent its support to the Bengal Landholders' Association, and so did the newspapers of the educated middle class—the *Bengalee*, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and the *Indian Mirror*.³⁹ The combined influence of the big mofussil zamindars and the educated Bengalis ensured the success of the new Association. From the beginning the lesser gentry, the professional groups and the Congress politicians were an important element in the Bengal Landholders' Association. Well known Congressmen and lawyers, such as Rashbehari Ghosh, Bhupendranath Basu, Hirendranath Dutt and Byomkesh Chakravarti, were on the executive committee; so was the nationalist poet Rabindranath Tagore.⁴⁰

Thus this fresh outbreak of political factionalism in Calcutta resulted in a split within the landed aristocracy which brought a new access of strength to the nationalist movement in Bengal in the form of the support of several big mofussil landlords for the political demands of the educated Bengalis. The formation

of the Bengal Landholders' Association in 1901 was an important political event, because it initiated along with the Indian Association the anti-partition agitation of 1905. It ensured for the subsequent Swadeshi movement the valuable material support of rich and influential zamindars. The Congress politicians of Calcutta forged new connections with important landed interests and further consolidated their network of useful political contacts in the countryside.

The main social basis of their support in the districts, however, was still the lesser gentry and professional groups. It was the support of this mofussil service gentry which gave the Indian Association and the Bengal Congress its commanding position in the later nineteenth century. The Indian Association leaders showed remarkable skill in developing these contacts, and this ensured their growing control of formal constitutional politics to the exclusion of the Calcutta landed aristocracy.

As early as 1883 a Member of Ripon's Council had noted how strong was 'the feeling of antagonism and contempt' between 'the older Hindus of good position', represented by the British Indian Association, and the 'younger and more noisy party', represented by Surendranath Banerjea. 'I am afraid', wrote the Member, 'the power of influencing Bengali public opinion is slipping from the hands of the former, in spite of the strong social and quasi-official support which Eden gave them at the expense of their rivals'.⁴¹ By 1900, as we have seen, the apprehension had been fully realized. The 'noisy party', no longer so young and soon to be challenged by a younger extremist group, had consolidated their position at the expense of the older Hindus of good position.

It was not that the groups were always at odds. In 1885 the British Indian Association lent its support to the move for national unity by participating in the Indian National Conference organized by the Indian Association. However, by 1888 the Calcutta landed aristocracy had more or less formally dissociated themselves from the national movement. This followed the expression of Dufferin's disapproval of the Indian National Congress, which made it clear that they could not join the Congress without incurring the displeasure of the government. As men of great wealth they could not afford to provoke the wrath of the authorities. Maharaja Sir Jotendra Mohun Tagore, the political leader of the Calcutta landed magnates, was at first a supporter of the Congress, but he withdrew his support when Lord Dufferin launched his verbal assault on the Congress

movement. When the Maharaja cut off his connection with the Congress, most big zamindars followed his lead. This was a source of financial weakness for the Congress. In 1896 Surendranath Banerjea and Motilal Ghosh, rival leaders of the 'educated middle class' in Bengal, launched a joint move for a representative board to control Congress affairs, which would be controlled by an equal number of representatives of the landed aristocracy and the educated middle class. Jotendra Mohun Tagore gave his blessing to the plan and Ranade and Pherozeshah Mehta were contacted for their support.⁴² But the attempt at reconciliation failed and the relations between the two groups were increasingly embittered by the failure of the British Indian Association in electoral and constitutional politics.

The Calcutta nationalist leadership therefore turned to the lesser gentry for rural support and found it among the pleaders who represented gentry interests in the district. It was the connections which the Calcutta leaders developed with small landed and professional interests in the countryside which gave the Congress movement in Bengal so much volume in its early phase. The highly educated, mobile and numerous gentry in the districts, and their close connections with a Western style liberal nationalist leadership in Calcutta, were the unique features of Bengal politics in the later nineteenth century. These features lent to Bengal politics a more well organized and more radical form compared to other parts of India.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, rate-payers' associations in mofussil municipalities and people's associations in districts were fairly numerous. The Indian Association maintained regular correspondence with these associations, and especially with the District Bar Associations.⁴³ Moreover, it organized annually a Bengal Provincial Conference with a regularity not matched by the leaders of other provinces. On their way to the Madras Congress of 1894, the Bengal leaders decided to hold provincial conferences in different mofussil centres from year to year.⁴⁴ From 1895 the Bengal Provincial Conferences were held usually in the districts. This stimulated the political consciousness of the local gentry and brought them into closer political contact with Calcutta.

The Bengal Provincial Conference of Natore 1897 was perhaps the most strikingly successful of these annual gatherings during the nineties. It was held in a remote corner of Bengal and was remarkable for the participation of the big zamindars of the district—the Rajas of Natore, Dighapatia, Putia and

Chowgaon. The Maharaja of Natore, who presided over the reception committee, exhorted the landed aristocracy—a class holding aloof from the Congress—to take their proper and legitimate place in that national assembly. An even more noteworthy feature of the Natore Conference was the prominence given to Bengali speeches with a view to making the proceedings intelligible to those who did not know English. For the first time there was a Bengali rendering of the presidential speech, which was translated from English by the poet Rabindranath Tagore.⁴⁵ Here was a tentative effort to reach the interior, and to reach it through the vernacular.

The Indian Association also took care to give a lead to mofussil interests and to take up the cause of the mofussil gentry whenever they apprehended danger from any government measure. By highlighting these issues, the Indian Association maintained a more or less continuous pressure of political agitation. By representing the interests and aspirations of the mofussil gentry, it widened the scope of its political agitation and acquired the support which enabled it to win its conspicuous success in legislative politics. It won marked success in some of these agitations and thus increased its prestige and support in elections. Two examples may be given of such successful political agitation on behalf of the gentry. Both campaigns were directed against government measures which were inimical to the interests of the mofussil landed and professional gentry.

In 1892 the Government of Bengal, impressed by existing abuses in the municipal administration revealed in the reports of the Divisional Commissioners, introduced a bill curtailing the powers of the mofussil municipalities and providing for the appointment of official chairmen for the large municipalities. The only Indian paper to defend the undemocratic measure was the *Hindoo Patriot*, the organ of the zamindars, who felt dissatisfied with their virtual exclusion from positions of municipal power.⁴⁶ With this single exception the Indian press in Calcutta combined to express the widespread dissatisfaction of the educated Bengalis with a measure intended to deprive them of the power they had so long enjoyed in the mofussil municipalities. The mofussil gentry in the towns of Bengal whom the measure principally affected had as yet no adequate means of organized agitation. Inevitably the *Bengalee* newspaper and the Indian Association, both based on Calcutta and controlled by Surendranath Banerjea, took the lead in mobilizing opinion in the mofussil towns on this issue. Through the efforts of the

Indian Association a meeting of municipal Councillors from different towns of Bengal was held in the Town Hall of Calcutta, where more than thirty municipalities were represented. The *Bengalee* had the proud satisfaction of declaring that this particular meeting was not a meeting of schoolboys or even of Calcutta citizens, a charge often brought by the Anglo-Indian press against protest demonstrations.⁴⁷ Following this meeting a vigorous agitation was mounted against the bill in the mofussil and in almost all important towns meetings were held in protest. The government ultimately responded to the political pressure and a new Act was passed in 1894 which was less severe than the 'Draconian Bill' of July 1892. The provision about official chairman for big municipalities was dropped.

The Legal Practitioners' Bill, more popularly known as the Touting Bill, was introduced in the Supreme Legislative Council by the Government of India in 1896. It, too, affected the professional groups in the mofussil towns, since it extended the powers of the district authorities over the legal practitioners. The bill provided that if any legal practitioner secured business through a tout and paid him a commission, he would be liable to imprisonment for six months—'a terrible provision' which took away the breath of a great many pleaders in the small towns.⁴⁸ This time, too, the Indian Association of Calcutta took the lead in organizing an agitation to preserve the independence of the district bar. At Surendranath Banerjea's initiative a unique demonstration of mofussil lawyers was held in the Town Hall. The select committee revised the unpopular features of the Touting Bill in view of the strength of the agitation in Calcutta. Bengal took the initiative in the question and scored a conspicuous success by means of organized agitation.⁴⁹ The event demonstrated how advanced the machinery of political agitation was in Calcutta and how deeply political consciousness had penetrated the mofussil in Bengal.

Thus on more than one occasion the highly politicized gentry of Bengal and their political leaders in Calcutta were able in the later nineteenth century to persuade the government to revise policies on which they felt strongly. The Indian Association had created a political network covering the province which no other association elsewhere in India could match in the eighteen nineties, except perhaps the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha. Socially the Association's achievement was based on successful participation in modern institutions: success in English education, success in the new professions, and success in representative and electoral politics within the newly created

institutional complex of municipalities, district boards and legislative councils. The Bengali gentry had shown unusual aptitude in all these directions and this explains the greater strength of liberal nationalist politics in Bengal in the later nineteenth century.

Reactionary populism and non-institutional politics

But for such a numerous gentry, educational, professional and electoral success could never be universal. For every successful career, there were many failures in these inter-related fields of activity. Success was but unevenly distributed among the gentry in the sphere of modern institutions. Consequently the liberal social and political values which naturally accompanied success in that sphere were also skin deep among the gentry. In the nineties a new kind of populism, characterized by social orthodoxy and political radicalism, gained ground among the less successful sections of the Bengali gentry. It was a movement which threatened to undermine the liberal, constitutional and reformist nationalism, which had found a natural focus in the Congress and the Indian Association, based on the more successful and westernized elements among the gentry who were strongly attached to a liberal ideology emphasizing the twin features of social reform and constitutional progress.

The organizational defects of the Congress, which the leaders themselves admitted, gave a handle to critics who wanted a different sort of national organization. R. C. Dutt, one of the leading Congressmen after his retirement from the I.C.S., wrote to Gokhale in 1903 : 'The Congress should have an Executive Committee,—to work throughout the year to work throughout the country, to be in touch with meetings, associations and the people everywhere, to correspond with the Govt., to advise on important matters,—to help beneficent acts of legislation,—to oppose such bills as Official Secrets Bill. The Congress works for four days in the year,—the Executive Committee should work throughout the year with the authority of the Congress, making that body a living power in the country'.⁵⁰ Failure to implement these plans of tightening up the organization began to undermine its authority as a more impatient younger generation of Congressmen emerged by the end of the nineteenth century. In the early diaries of Hemendra Prasad Ghosh as a student (later he was an associate of Aurobindo Ghosh in editing the extremist *Bande Mataram* paper), the Congress appeared almost as a political festival, like the Durga Puja, where young and old alike flocked together, whether they

had faith in the thing or not.⁵¹ Young and ambitious Bengali Congressmen stressed these organizational defects to press for a remodelling of the Congress on lines different from the liberal and constitutional channels through which it had hitherto proceeded. Motilal Ghosh, an old rival of Surendranath Banerjea in Calcutta politics, had kept up a continuous opposition to his leadership since 1876. He, too, had advocated through the columns of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, which he edited, a more socially orthodox and politically radical nationalism. Significantly, this paper had consistently advocated the class interests of the petty landlords,⁵² a class which it identified as the landed middle class and which was less exposed to the liberalizing influences of metropolitan Calcutta. Young as well as old Congressmen in Calcutta who were excluded from its inner counsels tended to look for support among the petty landlords, clerks, teachers and small town lawyers.

The natural vehicle of the opinion of these lesser landed and service gentry, proud of their high caste and not too well educated in English, was the vernacular press. The vernacular paper with the largest circulation, *Bangavasi*, was violently opposed to the liberal nationalism of the Congress leaders. The Indian National Congress—it was the verdict of the *Bangavasi*—was not a national congress, but a congress of denationalized men.⁵³ The assembled babus, by requiring an admission fee, showed that they did not believe in the principle of equality which they professed. The Congress was the representative, not of the masses, but of the English educated.⁵⁴ The *Bangavasi* had no objection to speechifying in English for three mortal days, hisses, huzzas, and movings and secondings of resolutions. But it objected to the holding of the Congress in the name of all Indians and all Hindus. 'Do not give a handful of ashes the name of a conflagration, nor a molehill the name of the Himalayas, nor a puddle created by the feet of kine the name of an ocean'.⁵⁵

Such terms expressed the natural disapprobation of poor but genteel Bengalis excluded from successful participation in the constitutional framework within which the more Westernized and prosperous Bengali Congressmen had consolidated their position. So great was the dislike of their success that the *Bangavasi* was prepared to join the landed magnates in a chorus of condemnation of the 'vakil raj' that had been established in municipalities, district boards and legislative councils. The populism of the lesser gentry had an undemocratic aspect which expressed itself in its opposition to tenancy legislation in favour

of the peasantry⁵⁶ and its contemptuous attitude towards the lower classes. The *Bangavasi* unconsciously revealed this aspect in its opposition to the Congress demand for elected legislative councils. In the municipal elections, it said, butchers, milkmen and other low caste people had been returned. No respectable man would canvass for election. Government, advised the paper, should therefore reject the Congress demand. This was very much in line with the sentiments of the big zamindars to whom the petty landlords counterposed their populism. On one other point, too, the lesser gentry fell in with the magnates in opposition to the Congress: on the issue of social reform. The *Bangavasi* was irreconcilably opposed to it. It condemned in severe terms the proceedings of the Social Congress, an adjunct of the Indian National Congress, which recommended during the Bombay session of 1889 that girls should not be married before the attainment of puberty. When in response to this agitation for social reform, the Government of India brought up the Age of Consent Bill in 1891, the *Bangavasi* played a major role in mounting an abusive campaign against it which showed the strength of orthodox feeling in Bengal.

The orthodox campaign against the Age of Consent Bill was the first major demonstration of the fact that given a suitable opportunity, the forces opposed to the liberal nationalism represented by the Congress were also capable of staging a political agitation on a wide scale. These forces were to manifest themselves later on in the Swadeshi and extremist movements on an even wider scale. Thus in some respects the Age of Consent controversy foreshadowed as early as 1891 the remarkable political developments in Bengal after 1905. This was an indication of the relatively high rate of political mobilization in Bengal compared to other provinces, for it is interesting to note that although the Age of Consent Bill was meant for the whole of India, only in Bengal was an agitation set on foot against it which was of sufficient strength to cause anxiety to the government. Madras, Bombay and Upper India submitted rather tamely to this alleged violation of Hindu religion in comparison with Bengal.⁵⁷ In Calcutta the Congress and the Indian Association were at least temporarily dislodged from the political limelight and the battle between the government and the social reformers on the one hand and the landed and orthodox Hindus on the other engaged public attention for the moment. The Sadharana Brahmo Samaj was the major advocate of the bill in Bengal. The Indian Association, which showed its liberal reformist

sentiments, also passed a resolution that the age of consent should be raised to thirteen. Two liberal Congressmen and leading barristers—Rash Behari Ghosh and Manmohan Ghosh—lent support to the bill. So did the vernacular paper *Sanjivani*, the progressive and radical paper of the Brahmos, which was edited by Krishna Kumar Mitra, a close associate of Surendranath Banerjea in the Indian Association and a leader of the Sadharana Brahmo Samaj.⁵⁸ The *Bengalee*, edited by Surendranath Banerjea, warned that disastrous effects would ensue to the interests of the nation if the impression gained ground that while Indians clamoured for political privileges, they were not prepared to make the smallest advance along the line of social progress. But seeing the way the wind was blowing in Calcutta, senior Congress leaders in Bengal, W. C. Bonnerjee and Surendranath Banerjea, decided not to take too prominent a part in supporting the bill.

Even so they were sharply criticized at a public meeting in the Sobhabazar residence of the wealthy landed family of the Debs, where Kalinath Mitter, an orthodox opponent of Surendranath Banerjea in the Calcutta Corporation, blamed 'a few Babus who had been to England, and returned to their mother-country with new-fangled ideas'. Motilal Ghosh, Surendranath's old rival, made his presence felt at this meeting. But what was interesting about it was that apart from politicians such as Mitter and Ghosh, there were non-political public figures who took a prominent part in the proceedings. Pandit Sasadhar Tarkachuramani, a reactionary intellectual who had long argued that everything in Hinduism was 'scientific', delivered a fiery speech against the bill in the meeting.⁵⁹

Though the Tarkachuramani's participation was a reminder of the neo-Hindu reaction behind the controversy, the agitation also possessed a strong nationalist flavour. It was not supported by orthodox Hindus only. Social reformers with nationalist pride, notably Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the champion of widow marriage, and Rajnarayan Basu, the leader of the Adi Brahmo Samaj, opposed the bill on the ground that reform should come from within Hindu society, and not through official legislation.

This is not to deny that orthodox neo-Hinduism lay at the core of the movement. The *Bangavasi* led the movement, taking up the position that marriage was a matter of religion and that age of consent would interfere with religion.⁶⁰ Bipin Chandra Pal, who as a member of Sadharana Brahmo Samaj lent his support to the bill at this time, recalled later on that

the whole agitation was carried on in a way that could not help lowering the British character and British civilization in the eyes of the Indian people.⁶¹ The *Bangavasi* began to publish a series of articles attacking the marriage institutions of the West, giving figures of divorce and foundlings in Britain and elsewhere. The government instituted a prosecution against the paper for sedition, but it tendered an apology and was let off with a fine.

The landed magnates of Bengal came out for the movement in a big way. The British Indian Association took part in the agitation prominently. Big mofussil zamindars joined the Calcutta landed aristocracy and helped the movement spread from Calcutta to the districts. Among the Calcutta magnates, Maharaja Sir Jotendra Mohun Tagore, Raja Rajendra Narayan Deb of Sobhabazar, Kumar Sarat Chandra Singh of Paikpara, Maharaja Narendra Krishna Deb, Raja Rajendralal Mitra and Ramnath Ghosh of Pathuriaghata patronized the agitation. In the Mofussil the movement derived support from the Maharaja of Nadia, the Maharaja of Dinajpur, the Maharaja of Natore, Raja Sasisekhareswar of Tahirpur, Maharaja Surya Kanta Acharya Chaudhury of Mymensingh, Maharani Swarnamayi of Kasimbazar and Raja Peary Mohun Mukherjee of Uttarpara.⁶² The Maharaja of Nadia convened a big meeting in the palace of Krishnanagar where he personally opposed the bill.⁶³ Meetings were also held in Dacca, Mymensingh, Bogra, Barisal, Murshidabad and other places.⁶⁴

Besides the territorial magnates, the lesser gentry, including in their ranks the traditional medical and priestly elements, opposed the Age of Consent Bill and imparted to the movement a populist character. The meeting in the Sobhabazar mansion was attended by numerous Brahman pundits, practitioners of traditional Ayurvedic medicine, merchants, bankers, doctors, lawyers and editors of newspapers. All the leading vernacular newspapers in Calcutta and the districts with the exception of the *Sanjivani*, pushed the campaign, along with the *Hindoo Patriot*, the English language newspaper of the landed aristocracy, and the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, the complementary English language newspaper of the educated gentry. The excitement of the agitation was financially so beneficial to the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* that Motilal Ghosh seized this opportunity to turn the paper into a daily, thus scoring off Surendranath Banerjea's paper *Bengalee*, which still remained a weekly.⁶⁵ Upset by his successes, A.O. Hume, the founder of the Congress, wrote to the Viceroy that the *Amrita Bazar*

group was stirring people up and taking them out of the hands of the Congress and instigating them against the Congress as the ally of the British in the alleged interference with Hindu religion.⁶⁶ The movement was, indeed, organized on a scale that had not previously been attained by any of the agitations of the liberal leaders of the Congress and the Indian Association. For the first time in Calcutta, a monster meeting was held in the Maidan. The *Bengalee* admitted it to be an enormous meeting, the largest that had ever been held to protest against any measure of the government.⁶⁷

It was because the orthodox forces were able to harness the nationalist sentiments behind the agitation that the protest against the bill acquired so impressive a character. The lesser gentry, deeply imbued with nationalism and social orthodoxy, made it a populist movement. Even so, the lower classes were not drawn into it. The agitation failed to force the government to abandon the bill. From this failure the *Bangavasi* drew the interesting moral that agitations were fruitless. It advocated that Hindus should not use British articles and should start mills and manufacture the goods that were imported.⁶⁸ Here, then, was the germ of the idea which later on blossomed into the Swadeshi movement. But if in some ways the controversy of 1891 exhibited the features of the populist and radical nationalism that appeared in 1905, in other ways it also foreshadowed its characteristic limitations: the combination of lesser gentry aspirations and orthodox Hindu sentiments—a combination dangerous in a rural hinterland where the Muslim peasantry formed the majority of the population.⁶⁹ Yet in a way the controversy broke new ground in methods of political opposition. The movement was organized along the indigenous connections of the Bengali gentry society, and independently of the British electoral and representative network which the Congress and the Indian Association depended upon.

Generalizations

Political developments in Bengal were somewhat unusual in comparison with other areas of India in the later nineteenth century. The Bengali gentry, who showed a high degree of adaptability to the new conditions imposed by British rule, responded positively to the institutional framework developed by the British. They secured legal titles to the land under the Permanent Settlement, graduated in large numbers through

the new institutions of English education, achieved a new mobility in government and other services, expanded into the press, the bar and other professions, put into the working of local self-governing and legislative bodies an unusual vigour and built up well knit networks of political organization along the lines of the constitutional framework of British administration. The liberal political achievement in Bengal, as embodied in the Indian Association led by Surendranath Banerjea, was a matter of envy to Congressmen in other provinces.

Another notable feature of political developments in Bengal, which made itself felt as early as the eighteen nineties or even as far back as the eighteen seventies, was a kind of genteel populism which developed largely though not entirely outside the constitutional framework of British administration. It was not so liberal or constitutional in its tone. The *Amrita Bazar* group developed in opposition to the liberal leadership of Banerjea a strident note in political dissidence as early as the eighteen seventies. But the under-currents which flowed under the columns of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and the vernacular newspapers burst into the open with dramatic suddenness in the Age of Consent controversy of 1891. Opposed to social progress or any genuine economic egalitarianism, the new populism, however, indicated the lines of future political developments by criticizing 'babu politics' for its Anglicized tone and its dependence on the British. Behind the phenomenon, too, stood the gentry—that large mass among them who were not so successful in competing within the new educational, service, professional, municipal and representative structure created by British rule. It was a populism of the lesser gentry, and potentially threatened by the Muslim and low caste peasant populism that was yet to make its appearance.

These were features which gave distinction to later nineteenth century Bengal politics, but they have general implications for the historical study of Indian nationalism. In trying to understand political mobilization in the Indian countryside, historians have to pay close attention to the relationship between sophisticated urban leadership and rustic peasant society. This has been done of late by Max Harcourt (Bihar), Gyanendra Pandey (United Provinces), David Hardiman (Gujarat), David Washbrook (Madras), Hites Sanyal (Bengal) and many other historians. But the full story of political mobilization in the countryside will be told only when historians also pay some attention to the complex interaction between

the educated urban leadership and the rural genteel society. This relationship is especially important to the understanding of the development of Indian nationalism in its early phase, but it continues to be a vital factor in the phase of mass movements under Gandhian leadership as well. Leadership at the grass roots, the crucial intermediaries between the Congress high command and the rural population, required a certain ability to communicate between two worlds. It is becoming increasingly clear that in the inter-war period this ground level leadership was drawn predominantly from high caste petty landed families with some education. But even earlier than this, the crucial importance of these gentlefolk in rural mobilization had been demonstrated during the Swadeshi movement in Bengal.

Thus it is necessary to trace out the social links between the professional politicians who were prominent in the Congress and the rural genteel constituency to which they appealed in order to muster support in the countryside. This brings us to a point which is crucial to the understanding of British Indian politics. The relationship between the professional Congress leadership and the country gentlefolk was one of blood. They were not organically different elements which had to 'communicate' with each other across an ethnic cultural gap. Branches of the same trunk, they were related to each other by very numerous ties of kinship, interests, aspirations and emotional and cultural sympathies. The antagonism between the Anglicized Babu and the petty landlord or clerk, which was so evident in the Bengali vernacular press from the eighteen seventies onwards, was an antagonism within an extended social family. It would not be difficult to point to lineages of Bengali gentry within which certain families settled in Calcutta, adopted Western styles of living and rose to high professional eminence, while other branches stayed back in the country and were steadily impoverished by the subdivision of their ancestral property, clinging to their orthodox values, food habits and social codes with all the pride of high caste exclusiveness.

The so-called 'educated elite' was thus an integral part of the high caste rural gentry. The Bengali gentry were based on the land and expanded into the modern professions and bureaucracy along the direction of a pre-existing tradition of service under the Bengal nawabs. Such traditional groups of service gentry were to be found all over India and were the products of a characteristic combination of good birth, ancestral property (generally small) and inherited traditions of literacy.

Clusters of such high caste gentry families of small means and good education were to be found among the Kashmiri pandits, Kayasths and sharif Muslims in U.P., the Khatris and Aroras in the Punjab, the Chitpavans in Maharashtra, the mirasdari Brahman families of Tanjore, the Nayars of Malabar and the Bikrampur babus of East Bengal. They were to be distinguished from Rajas, zamindars and owners of broad acres. Their social asset was educational and service mobility sustained by small landed property and traditions of literacy. Traditionally they achieved upward social mobility in state service, usually converting power into landed wealth. In the later nineteenth century a new pattern of upward mobility was established by their graduation from high schools and colleges, their visits to England, their arduous and often frustrated entry into the Indian Civil Service, their rapid rise through the Bar, their capture of influential positions in municipal and legislative bodies, their rise as the leaders of a new Indian public represented by the Indian National Congress. This particular social process is central to the understanding of the emergence of Indian nationalism and of the formation of the middle class which was said to have created and sustained it. What is central is the fact that such mobile families were part of local clusters of gentry who had been traditionally mobile and with whom they retained their ties of kinship, interests and sentiments even though permanent settlement in metropolitan centres did impose a growing distance from country cousins. In Bengal the gentry were quicker to adjust to the new pattern of mobility and hence the advanced form of nationalism there in its early phase. It will not do to dismiss them as a 'bhadralok elite' who monopolized land and education. The great majority among them were poor but genteel families who sustained rural literacy, represented enlightenment in the countryside, and responded creatively to the modern social, cultural and political movements emanating from the metropolitan centres. This was as true of the Bikrampur babus as of the Tanjore mirasdar families, and as true of the U.P. Kayasths as of the Chitpavan community of Maharashtra. The new urban 'elites' were extensions of the literate rural gentlefolk.

Let us not forget, moreover, that such rural gentlefolk were numerous in a country of several hundreds of millions, and that they were very thick on the ground in areas of concentration. It will not be difficult for the historians of the early Congress to trace the lines of education, migration and politics which linked that body to these thickly populated

areas of gentry habitation. It has been fashionable to condemn early Indian nationalism as elitist. Historians have started to realize of late that it was not as narrowly based as implied in Dufferin's famous phrase 'microscopic minority'. The 'connections' which Johnson (Maharashtra), Bayly (U.P.) and Washbrook (Madras) have recently traced between the Congress leadership and various clusters of local interests show that even on a fairly sceptical view of early nationalism it would be misleading to dismiss it out of hand as elitist. A misleading impression is often created by treating the early nationalists as an 'educated elite', a 'bourgeoisie' or an 'intelligentsia' cut off from the land. They were socially a part of the gentry and their thinking, aspirations, sentiments, strivings and goals were part of an enlightened genteel world which spanned town and country. Nothing showed the vitality of the connections between urban professional society and rural gentry more than the cultural nationalism which sustained political nationalism, in Tanjore no less than Bikrampur, in Rarh no less than Ratnagiri. The rising vernacular prose literatures and press, the movements of social reform and religious revival, the evocation of historical myths and memories to inculcate pride in the national heritage, created an intellectual and cultural climate which was sustained by the inspiration that the towns drew from the country, and the stimulus the country received from the towns. At the centre of this exchange of ideas and aspirations were the clusters of gentry families with their service extensions into the towns and the metropolitan centres.

That is not to deny the limitations of this phenomenon. The process of change that transformed the lives of the gentry did not affect the larger peasant population, or touched only fringes of it. A cultural and political nation emerged from this process, which was socially based on the gentry and which stood at an increasing distance from the less modernized masses of the rural population. In those regions where this gap followed the lines of the great religious divide between Hinduism and Islam, the process was fraught in the long term with explosive political tensions. Bengal happened to be such a region. The potentially dangerous communication gap is ironically illustrated by Prabhat Mukherjee through an incident that he relates in a short story of the Swadeshi era. The boys of the local national school in an East Bengal town seize a tin of foreign biscuits from the Muslim footman of a white planter and stamp on them to the accompaniment of lusty

cries of Bande Mataram (Hail Mother). The footman asks a passerby : 'What are they saying ? Banduk Maram (shoot the gun) ?' 'No, no, Bande Mataram'. 'What is that ?' 'Who can tell, brother. Must be a term of abuse. The boys say it nowadays whenever they see a sahib.'⁷⁰

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53. RNP 1895 : *Bangavasi*, 30 November.
54. RNP 1891, *Bangavasi*, 3 January.
55. RNP, 1890, *Bangavasi*, 4 January.
56. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 19 March 1885.
57. *Bengalee*, 7 February 1891 ; RNP 1891 : *Samaya*, 30 January.
58. RNP 1891 : *Dainik O Samachar Chandrika*, 9 and 11 February, *Sanjivani*, 10 January.
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60. RNP 1891 : *Bangavasi*, 7 January.
61. Bipin Chandra Pal, *Memories of My Life and Times*, Vol. II (Calcutta 1932), pp. 114.
62. RNP 1891 : *Bangavasi*, 24 January ; BIA, Annual Report for the year 1891.
63. RNP 1891 : *Dainik O Samachar Chandrika*, 25 January.
64. *Indian Nation*, 2 February 1891.
65. *Speeches and Writings of Babu Motilal Ghosh* (published by Satyagopal Datta and Bros., Calcutta 1935), pp. 138-147.
66. Lansdowne Collection, Mss. Eur. D. 558.21, no. 230, Hume to Lansdowne, 5 March 1891.
67. *Bengalee*, 28 February 1891.
68. RNP 1891 : *Bangavasi*, 27 March.
69. See the analysis of Sumit Sarkar, op. cit.
70. Prabhat Mukherjee, *Prabhat Granthavali*, Vol. 3, Short story entitled 'Khalas' ('His Release'), p. 111.

5

ORIGINS OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1905 : LANDOWNERS AND PROFESSIONALS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT, 1893-1901

HARI S. VASUDEVAN

An important element in the Russian Revolution of 1905 was the "Zemstvo Movement" of gentry and professionals involved in the Empire's most important bodies of elected local self government (the zemstva*). The "movement" consisted of a large scale public opinion campaign for constitutional reform—a campaign based on a series of illegal banquet meetings and various appeals to the peasantry for support. It was a substantial affair, with considerable support and staying power. Over the period 1901-1905, its members grew, extended their activities, and could rarely be prevented from organizing by the central government of the Empire. It was a revolt which constituted a major governmental crisis. On the one hand, it was a major threat to the proper functioning of the governmental apparatus. The zemstva were the major suppliers of welfare services to the countryside (insurance against fire, cheap medical and veterinary facilities and educational services) and were responsible for major administrative duties (distribution of the tax burden, maintenance of roads etc.) ; irregular activity at this level, and clashes with central government, inevitably made the problems of everyday civil administration more difficult. At a different level, the "Zemstvo movement" also constituted a major threat to law and order as conceived by central government. Zemstvo activists were frequently the most active and well-known of local leaders. Despite (in fact, often because of) their gentility, education and possession of land, they were respected individuals. The more so in some cases because they were very consciously members of the intelligentsia i.e. members of that amorphous group in Russia (of diverse social origin) who were committed, during the nine-

teenth and early twentieth centuries, to the democratization and reform of government and society. The revolt of this provincial elite inevitably posed a threat to the stability of government in the Empire.¹

Perceptive explanations of the "Zemstvo movement" point out the importance of the "conjuncture" of the 1890s. Due weight is given to the occasionally serious clashes between central government and zemstva before 1890 (considered the result of policy disagreements between "liberal" intelligentsia zemstvo activists and "reactionary" administrators of St. Petersburg) : but stress is placed on the 1890s as the origin of major tensions. Not only was the 1890s a period of continuing discontent within the agricultural lobby who dominated the zemstva (and who were seriously opposed to industrialization policies of the then Finance Minister, S. Yu Witte) : but it was a major period of expansion of zemstvo activity at a time when central government was determined to contain that activity. Intelligentsia zemstvo activists raised the standard of revolt : to be followed by many others suffering from the economic depression (which had begun in the 1880s, but whose seriousness had only marginally decreased during the 1890s). The more "popular" implications of the "Zemstvo movement" are considered the result of the increasing "professional", "non-noble" participation in the zemstva, a participation which (as later writers stress) was partly the result of a rapprochement between a generation of intelligentsia of the 1850s and 1860s ("liberal" in outlook) and one of the 1880s and 1890s (more "socialist" in outlook). Such circumstances made for a movement less directly associated with the landed gentry (as liberalism had been) and allowed for a greater appeal to other social groups—especially the peasantry.²

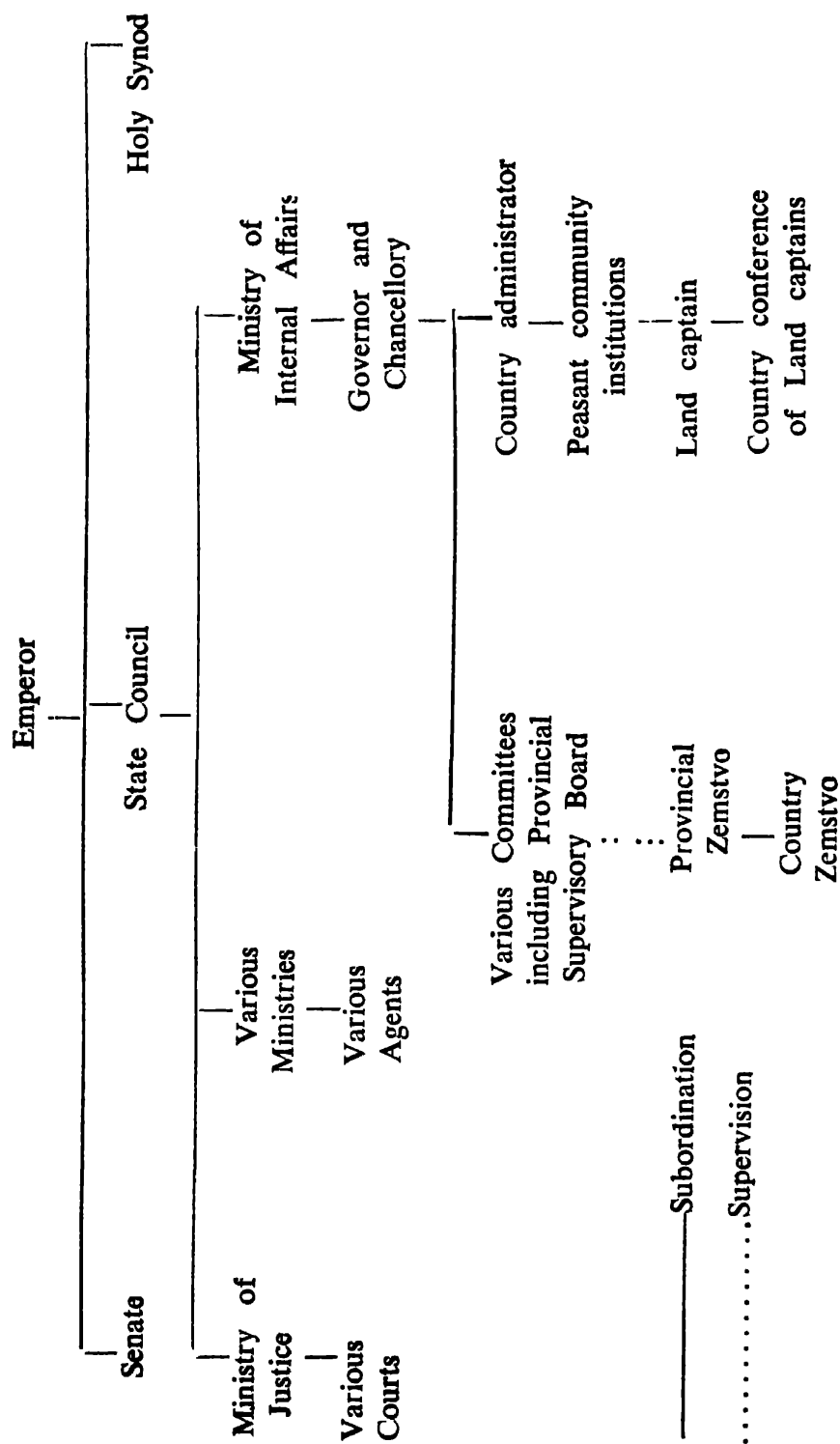
This examination of the 1890s follows a similar line of argument with important revisions. Throughout, there is less emphasis (than is traditional) on the importance of liberal intelligentsia ideologues as sources of the discontent in zemstva. The emerging tensions, it is stressed, were more the results of a series of complaints, and the liberal opposition was only one of several oppositions. This atmosphere of tension was substantially the result of government policies, which though not ill-founded, were certainly abrasive. In the discontent that was the consequence, it is impossible to say that any one social class played an extraordinary part : for those who were security-conscious and those who were rebellious were to be found in similar numbers among professionals as well as gentry.

Again, it is difficult to say that the participation of groups such as the welfare professionals was of decisive importance in finding sympathizers for the movement : at least in the way the case is normally argued. Certainly this participation might have added to the dimensions of the movement because of the area covered by these persons in the course of their duties : but it seems far-fetched to say that these professionals were more "democratic" than other sections of zemstvo society, and that this "democratization" was of critical importance to the movement.

The position and functions of zemstva in Russian government are well known (see Chart). Within thirty four provinces of European Russia, during 1893-1900, the zemstva (set up in 1864) were the major elected assemblies. Counties had their zemstvo assembly (elected and selected from all social classes). These assemblies elected the provincial zemstvo assembly. Both had welfare departments and issued bye-laws. The overall tax burden for provinces and counties was essentially distributed by these zemstva. Other elected assemblies included municipal councils and peasant community bodies (the latter specifically for those legally designated as "peasants") : but these affected comparatively few (in the case of the councils) or were poor and had few major functions (in the case of the peasant community bodies). All elected institutions were supervised by bodies of the central government (run by the Imperial Civil Service) nominated by the Tsar. Nominated institutions of the Central government (the State Council and the Ministries) framed all general legislation in Russia, with the Tsar's approval.³

By the end of the 19th century, the zemstva were the greater part of what rural Russia had in the way of a welfare system. Their personnel were one of the most ubiquitous elements in the provinces. Their legislators were equally so. In the Empire, backwardness and the abdication by the state of responsibility had their inevitable repercussions : local government was the only agency capable of attracting professionals to the poverty stricken countryside. Private enterprise, the norm of Western European welfare, was restricted for the most part to major urban areas. Populist enthusiasm, the increase of education and the over staffing of the metropolitan areas had provided the zemstva with their necessary personnel ; and the sophistication of rating, the funds to pay them. These developments had stimulated the zemstva to extend their activities. It

Russian Government in the 1890s



was thus that by the end of the 1890s, these institutions had a significant monopoly over certain key rural services.

Among the important welfare services run by the zemstva were their insurance facilities. All persons living within the zemstvo's immediate jurisdiction had to pay a compulsory due which entitled them to insurance against fire. Additional insurance could also be taken in different provinces. Most of the insurance in the rural areas was undertaken by the zemstva, during the 1890s. Private Insurance Companies (such as the Salamandar and the Moscow Society), operated through an Insurance Syndicate (founded in 1875) and provided similar facilities to those supplied by the zemstva. By their own confession, however, they had made little headway in the countryside by the 1900s. Zemstva were pre-eminent in this area.⁴

The zemstva's medical services were also of critical importance to the provincial population. The extent of these is evident from official statistics. Doctors working in local government numbered 2630 in 1880 (1818 zemstvo doctors). Of the 9891 remaining, 2629 were military and naval doctors. Non-zemstvo medical were not evenly distributed. Over 3500 personnel were in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Warsaw and Odessa. Hospital statistics of 1892 further substantiate the importance of the zemstva in the countryside. In the zemstvo provinces, there were 2462 hospitals of different types with 67337 beds. Of these, 1162 were zemstvo hospitals (33088 beds).⁵

These medical statistics took into account all state institutions (including Prison and Military hospitals) and all private institutions (including those for the Jews). Considering the hospitals which the general public used, the position of the zemstva stands out even more clearly. Of 1337 hospitals (43784 beds) 1146 (30130 beds) belonged to the zemstva. The other institutions in the original list included homes for the mentally retarded and other specialist institutions. Appendix Table (1) gives a more detailed breakdown of zemstvo medical service.

By 1900, zemstva provided cheap and accessible medical facilities in the countryside. Local government had its own hospitals and special G.P.s. in the countries. The latter either held regular consultancies at their place of residence or travelled around a fixed treatment area. Treatment and medicine were often dispensed at low cost (Rb.-/05 or Rb.-/10), with special concessions for the poor. Some zemstva had proceeded further. The Moscow zemstva had ended payment by 1900 in all but Volokolam and Klim countries (where it persisted for the more wealthy).

Zemstva also provided the countryside with veterinary facilities and elementary education. An idea of veterinary services is to be found in Appendix Table (2). The following figures give an indication of the zemstvo role in elementary education.⁶

TABLE 1
Expenditure on Elementary Education

Source	1894	1900
	(Sums in Rbls.)	(Sums in Rbls.)
Treasury	1362539	2610888
Zemstva	6099659	9003510
Municipalities	3357202	4644705
Peasant Communities	4523849	5416478
Other	2828490	4443815

Source : N. Hans, *A History of Russian Educational Policy* (London, 1935).

This range of activities, in fact, placed substantial authority and funds at the disposal of those controlling zemstvo affairs. In addition to the direct income from zemstvo rates (see Table 2), there were Special Funds in the zemstva's charge—Funds preserved for certain fixed functions, but whose investment was in the hands of the zemstva (whose administrators and policy makers might place the money in Mortgage Banks, bonds etc.). Such funds amounted to over 118 million rubles in 1899. Many jobs, moreover, (in Insurance, Education etc.) were at the disposal of the zemstva, and some (especially those of council member and council President) were by no means poorly paid. In the 1890s, therefore, the zemstva were an extremely significant source of patronage and welfare : this was especially so since the range of their activity increased during the decade under consideration. Elected Local government bodies did not have the vast resources of the central administration but that difference was not so significant when the resources of the central government were difficult to obtain. Those who governed through the zemstva inevitably became local gods in their own right—men to whom one paid court and whose portraits and plaques were distributed over a number of public places.

There can, of course, be little doubt about (in the normally understood sense) the non-representative character of

the zemstva during the 1890s : and this demands substantial attention in any survey of their position in the Russian countryside. Despite an apparently broad social base, the class bias of the zemstva becomes evident on closer scrutiny (See Table 3). The county zemstvo assemblies were elected (from local

TABLE 2

Income estimates of zemstva (in '000s of rubles)

Province	1885	1890	1895	1903
Bessarabia	895.9	1093.4	1240.9	2447.7
Vladimir	1262.7	1451.3	1971.3	3102.2
Vologda	873.7	1009.6	1355.3	2739.8
Voronezh	1371.9	1711.1	2175.5	3144.7
Vyatka	2023.5	1969.0	2644.0	4688.7
Ekaterinoslav	1348.3	1503.7	1793.4	3658.2
Kazan	1348.6	1131.4	2335.7	2508.2
Kaluga	843.7	854.6	1097.0	2049.0
Kostroma	927.6	998.7	1384.4	2704.5
Kursk	1473.4	1655.8	2864.5	4286.2
Moscow	1776.6	1891.8	2545.4	4497.6
N. Novgorod	1129.9	1221.4	1707.7	2509.2
Novgorod	1035.9	1081.8	1349.0	2773.3
Olonets	537.8	646.7	700.9	1431.5
Orel	1091.1	1169.4	1529.6	2241.9
Penza	920.6	915.5	1033.8	1452.3
Perm	2867.6	3135.5	3379.0	5026.1
Poltava	1897.5	2118.6	3018.1	4622.8
Pskov	708.9	1005.6	1124.8	1668.5
Ryazan	1407.4	1992.7	2334.7	3329.4
Samara	1755.4	1923.2	2838.0	4145.8
St. Petersburg	890.6	907.5	1349.9	2778.1
Simbirsk	963.2	923.3	1468.1	1782.3
Saratov	1751.9	1164.9	2032.4	3608.7
Smolensk	727.2	812.3	1033.1	2171.8
Tauride	1527.4	1336.0	2047.5	3310.0
Tambov	1715.3	1913.9	2324.4	3443.2
Tver'	1069.1	1287.5	1856.8	4009.1
Tula	820.8	1048.7	1425.4	2125.7
Ufa	883.9	1006.3	1441.0	2252.3
Khar ; kov	1668.7	1975.3	2134.6	4271.1
Kherson	1575.9	1959.4	2708.7	4778.9
Chernigov	1280.9	1396.5	1825.7	3196.1
Yaroslav	877.6	836.3	1211.1	2289.9

Source : B. B. Veselovskii, *Istoriya Zemstva za sorok let*, Vol. 1, p. 18.

TABLE 3

**Landholdings (in dessyatins) of provincial zemstvo
assembly members**

Province	(No of assembly members)	below 200	200- 500	500- 1000	1000- 5000	5000 and above
Vladimir	(48)	4	25	13	4	1
Kaluga	(48)	1	21	9	14	2
Tver'	(61)	3	15	23	13	2
N. Novgorod	(51)	—	15	15	13	4
Novgorod	(38)	—	5	8	22	2
Smolensk	(52)	—	16	17	17	1
Voronezh	(62)	3	24	13	18	2
Kursk	(60)	—	22	20	15	1
Orel	(60)	1	22	18	18	1
Tula	(56)	4	17	20	10	—
Tambov	(57)	2	16	18	16	5
Kazan	(36)	—	16	8	6	3
Penza	(46)	5	13	8	16	4
Simbirsk	(43)	4	13	9	12	3
Bessarabia	(36)	—	9	11	13	3
Ekaterinoslav	(34)	2	8	11	10	2
Tauride	(28)	—	2	4	9	6
Kherson	(45)	—	3	7	21	4
Poltava	(62)	2	21	19	18	2
Samara	(40)	4	7	9	15	3
Ufa	(28)	1	6	7	7	3
Vyatka	(48)	15	2	8	4	—
Perm	(30)	2	3	2	—	2
Vologda	(29)	6	6	10	5	—
Olonets	(13)	5	—	1	1	1

1 dessyatin = approx. 2.7 acres

Source : *N. M. Pirumova Zemsko-Liberal' noe Dvizhenie*. (Moscow, 1977) p. 76ff.

Social Origins of zemstvo assembly members (1890)

	<i>Nobles (or bureaucrats)</i>	<i>Non-nobles</i>	<i>Peasantry</i>
Counties	5647 (55.2%)	1415 (13.8%)	3174 (31%)
Provinces	1448 (89.5%)	141 (8.7%)	29 (1.8%)

Source : *Entsiklopedicheskiy Slovar' (Granat) Zemstvo*.

ratepayers and landowners) by electoral meetings where participants were divided into two curiae (noble and non-noble); representatives from the peasantry were designated by the Governor from lists submitted to him by the peasant bodies. But "electoral meetings and elections" had limited meaning in a country where free distribution of political literature and freedom of assembly were almost unknown. Again, the number of representatives for each curia (and the peasantry) were fixed in such a way as to give a disproportionately large number to the curia of the landowning nobility (before 1890, to the curia of landowners). Many of the peasantry who did attend, moreover, cannot be really considered "representatives". Elections in the villages were conducted in a haphazard manner, as drink flowed freely and money frequently exchanged hands. Finally, in the curia for noble and non-noble electors, absenteeism was high, making it questionable as to what these representatives represented.⁷

Social factors also affected the position of zemstvo professionals in rural society. The inevitable product of fine ways and education was resentment and suspicion. One of the Moscow zemstvo's correspondent pointed out, during a Statistical Department survey on peasant attitudes towards zemstva, that the population :

"..... consider that there is no benefit to be had from novelties, and it will be necessary to pay new taxes for everything. Generally, peasants do not feel that 'learned gentlemen' can help them : they fear them and avoid the zemstva."

It is important, however, to consider, while assessing this kind of evidence, that representation might (in a strict sense) be of a limited importance if the conventions of representation are neither established or developed. Association of interests in an indirect manner might assume considerable significance : and in Russia, this aspect of her political life was noticed (for instance, by the French diplomat Verstraete) whatever the tendency of the gentry or sections of the peasantry and professional and middle classes to stress the importance of representation as it was seen to function in France or Britain. Zemstvo men, therefore, whether duly elected or representative in the way French and British functionaries were, often assumed great importance in their provinces and districts : through the influence of those for whose jobs they had spoken and through the

goodwill of those for whom they opened schools and hospitals. I. I. Petrunkevich of Tver', for instance, was clearly of importance in the neighbourhood of his estate, Mashuk, in virtue of his attempts to ensure well developed civil amenities for his locality and in virtue of his ability to find jobs for those who solicited his help. The status and importance of zemstvo men became established in precisely this way, enhanced frequently by the very wealth that otherwise made them a target of envy and suspicion. It is not insignificant that 71% of the survey on zemstvo popularity conducted by the Moscow Statistical Department were different from the one quoted above : enthusiastic and positive. And this report cannot be ignored when it is clear from the statistics presented that the Moscow zemstva's services were good but not overwhelmingly exceptional.⁸

The importance of the zemstva in provincial life was all the more because of the limitations of the Imperial Police and Russia's governmental institutions.

In the 1890s, the Imperial Police were divided into the Okhrana, the Gendarmerie and the administrative police. The bulk of the job of supervision in the rural areas fell on the latter, as did the bulk of the job of collecting information on any form of unrest. Unfortunately, they were not up to their task.

The most important section of the provincial administrative police (peasant Constables and Hundredmen) were dismally corrupt. The Senatorial Inspection Reports of 1880-1881 had produced a gloomy picture of them. These officials of the peasant community bodies were :

".....illiterate, and with few exceptions not in receipt of any remuneration whatever for their services..... (They) not only do not execute those several duties which are theirs by law, but, for the greater part, do not even have an idea of what those duties are ; not only do they not assist members of the ordinary police in the discovery of transgressions, nor aid them in seeing to order, security and propriety in the rural areas, but, on the contrary, they not infrequently busy themselves about concealing from the eyes of the state police traces of transgressions and disorderliness in the rural areas...."

The position had changed little two decades later, indicating a particularly clinging problem. In 1901, the Minister of Internal Affairs collected information on the officials and concluded that the peasant communities felt themselves burdened by the necessity for the election and maintenance of the last. Normally, the lazars of the community, the abysmally poor or the crippled or those to be punished, were appointed to these posts. They were rarely trusted. In his comments on the Hundredmen and Constables, A. I. Novikov, who had served extensively in the provinces' non-official administration, was to dismiss them as persons whose conception of crime changed with the drink they were given or the morsels they were fed. The development was inevitable. Treated as menials, the peasant police became despicable through being despised. They were corrupt and generally resentful—constantly bearing a heartfelt loathing of their superiors.

The position might have been improved somewhat had there existed respectable and responsible instances which could check the shortcomings of the peasant police. This was not the case. The nature of the higher police officials, drawing salary, left much to be desired. Few had received secondary or higher education. Worse still, poorly paid and expected to maintain a high standard of living, including the education of children at urban schools, senior officials of the salaried state police slid into malpractice and corruption. The choice between comparative penury and lapse, which faced police officials, was described by Novikov in his notes on the Regional Police Officers (*uryadnik*).

“.....the Regional Police Officer received Rb. 40/- per month. For the money, he must maintain his family in house and home, horses with stables, feed himself on his tours and have an immaculate uniform and for appearance before important officials, a uniform fresh from the peg. The salary is insufficient for him since his needs are not those of a peasant....It is natural, because of this, that he gets used to feed himself for nothing and his horse for nothing. But it is worthwhile to begin along the slippery path of malpractice and it is difficult to stop oneself. The insufficiency of pay forces him to ‘takings’ (*vzyatki*).”⁹

Upper administration, (gubernatorial chancelleries, ministerial agencies and the civil service generally) was somewhat better. Tsarist institutions were organized to permit constant

exchange of information. The bureaucracy attempted often to obtain the best persons for service ignoring social status. A Civil Service commission of 1896 laid down that appointments should be decided more by education than by social origin. Only 250 or so officials of a group of over 2000 officials of the highest ranks (2nd and 3rd), in 1905, owned substantial estates. A respectable salary was well assured. In 1905, 91204 persons of a service of 397082 and more belonged to the earning elite (i.e. earned over c. Rb. 100/- per month).

General and critical weaknesses persisted, however, Government was very slow to change itself : for instance, there had been calls for police reform from the 1870s, but nothing had been done. Deficiencies such as over attention to detail continued. More centrally, there was a lack of faith, in the upper bureaucracy, regarding the competence of the Civil Service to govern. Even the centre's great achievement—its use of a number of 'link' institutions—was deficient. Those meant to supervise generally and pass information were overburdened. Inevitably, in such circumstances, care was essential in the handling of critically placed institutions such as the zemstva.¹⁰

In these circumstances, a measure of tolerance, if not respect and sympathy, was generated between zemstva and central government personnel. But there were important tensions in the relationship and major differences of approach and outlook arose because of the social and economic background of the functionaries here.

Before and after 1890, certainly, there was a good deal in common, socially, between local government activists and the career bureaucrats of the Imperial Civil Service. Pay and terms of service in the Civil Service were similar to those in local government. Many members of the Civil Service were drawn from the landed classes, as were the majority of zemstvo assembly members and a number of local government professionals. Popularly, distinctions between zemstvo society and the society of the bureaucracy tended to be fine ones : as was aptly perceived by Chekhov in his "Lady with the Little dog." Noblemen who were well approved of by the bureaucracy (the so-called Marshals of the Nobility, for instance) were active in local government work, and, in most provinces, there was a group of zemstvo workers who wished to work with the central government (such as the Snazin-Trubnikov group in Tver' during the 1890s). After service in zemstvo, local

government officials were sometimes taken into central government. Before 1890 this was so in the case of E. A. Kasinov and A. S. Erdeli of Kherson province and A. Kh. Stevan of Tauride province. It was also to be true of the career of B.V. Shturmer of Tver' in the 1890s. Central government took active notice of zemstvo luminaries on many important occasions : there were many zemtsy involved in the Kakhanov Commission's discussions on government reform (during 1880-84), for instance, and again in the composition of the committees which were to report on the needs of agriculture in 1900-1901.¹¹

However, the everyday life of the bureaucrat or the trained professional of the Civil Service often held problems quite different from those faced by zemstvo men. Income from land, for instance, was not of cardinal importance in the life of the civil servant. And this was not unimportant in the 1890s—for it implied a major difference in the sense of security that zemtsy and civil servants enjoyed (even if the privileges and the income from positions such as "land captain"—held by zemtsy—are taken into consideration). The famine of 1891-1892 had shown that the state of agriculture required attention. Russia was only just recovering from the agrarian crisis of the 1880s and early 1890s. Protection in France and Germany and low prices for agricultural goods in regional and international markets had caused widespread depression. Debts of farmers and landowners increased. After 1891, many blamed S. Yu Witte's policies at the Ministry of Finances for slow recovery. A document representing the views of the agricultural lobby showed the broad ranging nature of criticism. It attacked Russia's adoption of the gold standard in 1897—a cherished part of Witte's policies, creating as it did confidence in investments in Russia. For farmers the government's policy was tantamount to a revaluation of the currency ; credit became more difficult to obtain and imports became expensive. Given the scarcity of good agricultural machinery in Russia, this created resentment among agriculturists. They generally criticised the lack of any firm policy to boost production of and trade in agricultural goods.

After 1892, prices for agricultural goods had recovered slightly. Moreover, now as before landowners often managed to avoid the full effect of price fluctuations. Prices fell, peasants were unable to pay rents and arrears occurred. But this merely led landowners to organize their estate management on different lines. As one landowner of Pskov explained, it was pos-

sible to overcome difficulties by "adjusting oneself to circumstances as they took shape." R. P. Belavenskiy, the magnate concerned, dealt with cropping of section of his land personally and let out the remainder of the estate. He thus made "clear

Table on the impact of the Depression

(a) Decline of noble landownership in European Russia

Legal Class Groups	% land owned		
	1877	1887	1905
Nobility	77.8	68.3	52.5
Peasants	7.0	13.1	23.9
Merchants and burghers	14.2	16.3	20.2

Source : P. I. Lyaschenko, History of the National Economy of Russia.

(b) Fall in grain prices. (in Kopecks per pud for 50 provinces).

	RYE	WINTER WHEAT	OATS	BARLEY
1881	98	—	62	—
1882	80	—	57	—
1883	82	109	57	68
1884	74	82	56	69
1885	63	81	60	68
1886	57	99	48	56
1887	49	85	38	46
1888	53	84	45	54
1889	62	83	51	58
1890	59	73	48	56
1891	121	120	72	88
1892	85	92	63	71
1893	58	72	49	55
1894	41	51	35	41
1895	44	57	38	43
1896	45	72	44	48
1897	61	93	56	59
1898	70	90	65	65
1899	65	82	51	62
1900	59	80	50	60

Source : N. A. Egiazarova *Agrarnyy Krizis Kontsa XIX veka v Rossii* (Moscow 1959).

profit, without risk." He employed share croppers. The general impoverishment of the population meant it was dangerous to rent for money. Moreover, tenants willing to pay in cash were few—while those willing to share-crop were many. Land management on these lines, despite general difficulties, was profitable. There is also evidence that in certain areas (for instance in Tambov) landowners cultivated some land intensively and sold their produce competitively. The demand for land increased as a result, and the landowner could charge high rents for the rest of his estate.¹²

The Minister of Finances did not totally neglect agriculture : he could not disregard the interests of the land-owning interest. The policy of stimulating Russian industry with the aid of foreign investment required healthy internal economic conditions. Production and export of raw materials needed attention. Cash crops received protection. In 1894 the state took measures to stimulate cotton cultivation in Bokhara and Khiva. The import duty on American cotton was raised. From the same year, a Sugar Syndicate was established. Production was limited, a reserve stock established and special arrangements made for small producers. Further legislation treated flax production and export. As with other cash crops, prices had fallen here owing to low freight costs and intensive cultivation elsewhere. Demand was especially slack, however, as call for linen sail-work decreased.

In the area of grain production and trade, finally, assistance was given by the government by exempting fertilizers and agricultural machinery from import duties. Various measures were also contemplated to assist storage and to control prices.¹³

The results of government policy, however, could only partially remedy the situation. And successful managers and agricultural entrepreneurs constantly faced the strain of handling tenants and share croppers whose income was low. Both government and landowners faced two fundamental problems which had been the creation of the 1870s and 1880s : huge debts accumulated during a period of a catastrophic fall in agricultural prices, and a rapid increase in population which outstripped any gains made through the purchase of land. (See Table on the effects of the late nineteenth century depression). The difficulties posed for landowners could hardly be alleviated by piecemeal attempts at assistance : those whose fortunes had fallen needed substantial aid if they were to restore their wealth. Understandably, in the 1890s, members of the agri-

cultural lobby repeatedly emphasized the difficulties they were facing. Demands for easy credit and extensive economic assistance to the landowning nobility were to be made throughout the meetings of the Special Commission on the affairs of the Nobility (1897).

Zemstvo professionals also faced problems quite different on occasion from those confronting members of the civil service. Both opportunities and concerns were often quite distinct. Pre-occupation with rank and promotion, benefits and salaries, as well as general status were not dissimilar. But tenure was insecure—since many zemstva closed down institutions they opened, hardly worrying about those employed. Conditions of work also were frequently quite different in the zemstva: everyday life and work tended to be linked more closely with the filth and isolation of provincial life. Employed by individual zemstva, these professionals were (unlike civil servants) committed to long stays in the countryside, far from the glitter of the metropolis commonly associated with worthwhile living. Zemstvo workers travelled over poor roads to attend patients at isolated treatment centres, taught in leaky rooms to irregular classes and dealt with insurance paper work in remote villages. There were frequently no easy alternative avenues of employment as even doctors were to testify by the end of the century. Such a life was clearly different from the more secure existence of civil servants—who were pre-occupied with the more limited ups and downs of the provincial town or the metropolis, and who could always look with relief to transfers if their positions were uncomfortable. In their memoirs and writings, zemstvo professionals showed themselves extremely conscious of such distinctions of life style. They frequently saw themselves as the sufferers, the hardworked and the misunderstood. A blind bureaucracy frequently appeared as their worst enemies. It was a widely held self-image: and it has been almost wholly incorporated into some of the literature of the period.¹⁴

These social distinctions and prejudices added an edge to other disputes. As was the case before 1891, so too during 1891-1900, as a result of the legal and administrative position which the zemstvo local self government bodies occupied in Russia, there were many sources of tension between zemstvo members and the functionaries of central administration. The essential priorities the two groups of institutions had to follow were very different. In the long term, the course followed by the zemstvo institutions was naturally determined by provin-

cial political alliances. Central administrative personnel, on the other hand, and the policies they implemented, followed the principles governing in the central bureaucracy. There were some areas of activity that were common to both sets of institutions. Police were supervised by provincial noblemen who were not in government service (those concerned being the land captains or *zemskie nachal'niki*) ; members of the province's local government bodies or class organizations were employed in supervisory boards set up by central government. So, in the case of school councils and provincial supervisory boards (the *gubernskoe prisutstvie*, the highest provincial body for appeals on administrative decisions), Marshals of the Nobility and nominees of the zemstva were found working side by side with local agents of central administration.¹⁵ Land captains were chosen by the Governors in accordance with their own preferences, however, and the boards where civilians participated were weighted in favour of bureaucrats. In fact, central institutions were such that a fundamental difference existed between them and the local self government bodies : a difference which was not balanced, as in France, Germany, Austria, Hungary or Britain by the presence, at the highest level of government, of an elected institution which might both have calmed provincial elites and controlled the bureaucracy. An important lack of governmental sympathy frequently existed in Russia between local self government and central administration. The highest Imperial bodies of appeal for administrative matters were the Ministers and the State Council. When matters were decided here, Ministers and administrators had direct access while no allowance was made for complainants. The State Council was dominated by civil servants and military officials.

Had the two sets of institutions not been thrown together often, there might have been comparative peace in zemstvo-centre relations, and the differences of personnel counted for little. As it was, the position of 'live and let live' was impossible. The zemstva were meant to be in charge of local matters only. They could issue bye-laws only within the framework of existing general central legislation. The Ministers in St. Petersburg, together with the State Council, had a monopoly of law making in the broad sense. Moreover, every aspect of local life in zemstvo charge have some legislation connected with it. On many occasions, local government bodies had to appeal to the Ministries or the State Council. The dependent position of the zemstva was further reinforced by the nature of the police in the Empire. The police cadres were under the jurisdiction of

the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Frequently, zemstva had to turn to ministerial agents to have bye-laws properly implemented.

The situation was more tense because of the duties and range of central administrative institutions. By the statute of 1890 June, the Governor, the central government's most important local agent, was empowered to interfere with zemstvo actions if he thought the actions conflicted with the interests of the community. The administration in his charge gave the Governor all the expertise he desired, should he wish to maximize the use to which he put the legal power thus granted. His chancellory (*pravlenie*) contained Insurance, Medical and Veterinary Sections, and he could call upon the provincial and country school inspectors (agents of the Ministry of Public Enlightenment) if he required information regarding education. Local Statistical Departments and local agencies of the Ministry of Finances also existed—increasing the Governor's range.¹⁶

Zemstvo men could, of course, appeal administrative decisions. Officially, Russia was a limited Autocracy. The bureaucracy and the Tsar had to abide by law and precedent. But appeal meant a long wait. Appeal had to proceed through a number of instances, most of which were committed to taking a decision against the zemstva. The initial instance was the Provincial Supervisory Board, weighted in favour of central agencies. It contained two to four permanent nominated members, the local fiscal administrator (Ministry of Finances appointment), a Ministry of State Domains appointee, the provincial Procuror, a member of the regional court (*okruzhnyy sud*), the zemstvo council President, the Provincial Marshal of the Nobility and the Governor. Only after the next appeal instance (the Minister of Internal Affairs) did matters pass on to the equivalent of the Imperial Supreme Court—the Senate.

Inevitably the zemstvo men felt severely constrained. Thus, during the course of the committees of the Conference on the needs of Agricultural Industry, in 1902, a Khar'kov committee complained that :

“...the zemstvo exists in such an atmosphere of distrust and (its) very activity is so decisively limited within the tight margins of bureaucratic regimentation that it is impossible to be surprised at (the difficulties zemstva encounter)....”

Orel and Poltava committees called for greater trust from the central administration, and for greater freedom for the

zemstva to work. The Moscow committee complained of the existing limitations on zemstvo activity, and in Kostroma there was a call for more freedom for local organizations. A Chernigov committee thought that the centre should recognize that if the zemstva were to work effectively, they must have much greater freedom from supervision by the state departments.

The committees showed quite clearly, overall, that they considered that the zemstva lived under far too much surveillance. Occasionally, they called for revisions of the zemstvo statute of 1890, which was considered partly responsible for the unwelcome situation.¹⁷

In fact a central government policy of cautious discrimination against the zemstva was well established by 1900. When the Census of 1897 was conducted, for instance, the central government departments did not call upon the statistical sections of the zemstva for assistance. This was a source of irritation for zemstvo assembly members and professionals : their statistical sections had been organizing the information for rate distribution in the countryside for decades and their knowledge of the various problems of collecting statistics was incomparable. Deliberate discrimination was clearly involved.

Again, when a meeting of zemstvo council Presidents decided, at Nizhniy Novgorod in August 1896, to organize annual meetings of a similar nature, and to set up a bureau which would prepare the agenda for such meetings, the Ministry of Internal Affairs forbade the project.¹⁸

From the end of the 1880s, this policy of containing the zemstva had been popular in St. Petersburg. The law of June 1890 reflected the trend. Whereas by the law of 1864, zemstvo actions could only be challenged on the grounds of legality, this law extended the authority of the Governor over the zemstva and required that all zemstvo Presidents now be persons who had placing on the Table of Ranks, i.e. should have served in government service at some time. In important areas of zemstvo work, moreover, extra supervision had been introduced. Zemstvo work on education was brought under the control of the Church and the centre. Until the 1890s, the zemstva had established a number of schools alongside the government and Church schools. State supervision over the zemstva had been through the local school councils (*gubernskie and uezdnye uchililishchnye sovety*). These were chaired by the Marshals of the Nobility (elected by local assemblies of registered noblemen) and had present either the Director or the

Inspector of People's Schools (*narodnykh uchilishch*) and representatives of the eparchal administration, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and that of Public Enlightenment together with one or two zemstvo representatives. These councils had to confirm teachers in their positions and supervise education at county and provincial levels. In 1892, the government required the zemstva to transfer their elementary schools (*shkoly gramoti*) to the jurisdiction of the Church (though they continued to help in their organization). This was the first of other blows. In 1894, zemstvo representatives on the school councils required bureaucratic approval before they took their places. In 1896, the centre actually increased the quota of nominated members in school councils by including land captains among them. Some zemtsy naturally objected. Petitions were presented calling for an increase in the zemstvo representation on the school councils. These were eventually rejected.¹⁹

Such steps taken by central government could not but be badly received in the provinces. Zemstvo activists took their responsibilities for the sake of the interest these responsibilities possessed or the patronage and money they might bring. Removing authority from the zemstva, while permitting them to continue, merely led to frustration. Of course, there were a good number of zemstvo assembly and council participants who wished to minimize the amount of work done by the organizations. The Krupenskiys of Bessarabia, A. A. Arsenev of Tula and D. V. Khotyaintsev of Nizhniy were the type of zemtsy who saw political motivation behind any attempt to do anything in the zemstva.²⁰ Once he was involved in zemstvo politics, however, the powers and the funds the organizations possessed tended to have an impact on a zemstvo member. The interests the zemstva touched on led to bargaining and counter-bargaining—as Lev Tolstoy was only too aware. Moreover, the same powers acted as the incentive for the local nobleman or petty politician to become deeply involved in the organization. Local government connections might lead to a great fortune, as it did in the case of the Orel Marshal of the Nobility, Shermetev, who obtained a railway concession for the zemstvo and was responsible for placing it in the hands of the railway constructor, P. I. Gubonin, with substantial profit to himself. The increased interference and regulation by central elites was bound to cause excitement in this quarter and also to affect the conservatives who were seduced by the maze of locality politics.²¹

When criticized, members of the State Council and

Ministries responded that zemstva were not permitted to co-operate and that even when entrusted with critical administrative duties, the zemstva had proved sadly incompetent. The first point merely begs the question, while the second was even then a matter of debate. The reason for the hostility to zemstva must be sought elsewhere, and a more solid cause for it is to be found in the political attitudes of the major *chinovniki* of St. Petersburg.²²

Alexander III's coterie of advisors and Ministers were to continue to dominate central policies after the accession of Nicholas II in 1894. The central figure of this group was K. Pobedonostsev, the Procuror of the Holy Synod and a close friend and advisor of Nicholas II. He was supported by the young and efficient Minister of Finances (1892-1903), S. Yu. Witte, who had been a protege of Alexander III's trusted Minister of Finances, Vyshnegradskiy. No worthy opponents of the group existed in Ministerial circles. Goremykin was indolent as Minister of Internal Affairs (1895-1899). His successor, D. Sipyagin (1899-1902), was trusted by Pobedonostsev. I. D. Del'yanov and N. P. Bogolepov, at the Ministry of Public Enlightenment (1882-1897 and 1898-1901), were also friends of Pobedonostsev. Only A. S. Ermolov, Minister of Agriculture, stood out, but he was too weak to impress himself in matters of policy.²³

During the 1890s, Pobedonostsev was an established opponent of elected representative institutions. He had closely associated himself with Alexander III's rigid adherence to autocratic principles, and had been a close friend of the group that had been publicly connected with the Tsar's illiberalism (persons such as D. Tolstoy, M. N. Katkov and V. P. Meshcherskiy). Pobedonostsev had been a public opponent of principles of elected representation. In his article "The Great Lie of our Time," the statesman elaborated on his reaction :

"...one of the most deceitful of political principles is the principle of popular power, the ideas, unfortunately held since the time of the French Revolution, that every type of power proceeds from the people and has its basis in the will of the people...From here it is that the theory of parliamentarism emerges—a theory which, until this moment, has led the mass of the so-called intelligentsia into confusion and which has made its way into mindless Russian heads."

Pobedonostsev clearly understood that complete dismantlement of elected institutions could lead to "disorder" and "confusion of authority....". He was certainly wary of reorganization which would not leave "a measure of freedom" to "attract local interest". But generally, he favoured some substantial degree of control over elected institutions and had supported the reorganization of zemstvo institutions in 1890 (placing the institutions more firmly under control of central agents). Even after this, however, he had not been completely satisfied. In 1897, he was to write to Witte that : "...zemstva institutions in their present form introduce immoral and unruly tendencies into central government practice, impairing recognition of duty....".²⁴

Witte showed sympathy in the matter (if only for reasons of personal self-advancement and also for the sake of Pobedonostsev's general support elsewhere). When in 1898, the Minister of Internal Affairs, I. L. Goremykin, introduced a measure for extending zemstvo into the Western Provinces, Witte thought it fit to oppose the measure. He wrote to the Tsar on the matter. He argued that autocracy and self government were incompatible concepts. He pointed to the experience of Western European countries. To him, this showed clearly that the introduction of self-government at a local level inevitably led to its conquest of central power. The history of self government in Russia itself showed it was incapable of living with autocracy, he argued. The memorandum read as an attack on the zemstva.²⁵

Such views were natural to the central administration in this period. The enthusiasm for representative institutions had abated considerably in central circles after the establishment of zemstva in 1864. The introduction of rival principles of government were considered to have made for confusion in the internal administration of the Empire. The Kakhanov Commission, meeting in 1880-1885, had considered the fault of the zemstva precisely this administrative confusion.²⁶

The view continued to hold. It was probably what Pobedonostsev referred to when he spoke of the unruliness the zemstva introduced into government. It was certainly in Witte's mind when he wrote to the Tsar on the issue of introducing zemstva into the Western Provinces. Proper government, he contended, required good administration, and :

"...such administration is possible only when one and the same principle is firmly introduced in all adminis-

trative bodies....Zemstvo bodies cannot satisfy such a need for administrative unity within an autocratic system of government.

Central government was almost compelled to keep the zemstva in check with such views dominating in its sanctum-sanctorum.

Close surveillance and zemstvo-centre tension did not proceed solely from this essentially administrative confrontation. The problem had a more ideological and financial side to it. By the end of the 1890s, the centre was convinced that the zemstva posed a considerable threat to the very principles for which men such as Pobedonostsev stood. In turn, these persons were dismayed by the influence of such men as Pobedonostsev. The zemstva contained constitutionalists who subscribed wholly or partially to that "great lie" Pobedonostsev so hotly attacked. Such, for instance, were the liberal leaders of the so-called 'left' faction in the Tver' zemstva (I. I. Petrunkevich, F. Rodichev) and the 80 or so zemstvo activists who were to belong to the Constitutional Democratic and Octobrist parties in the First Duma including names such as A. V. Vasil'ev (Kazan), S. A. Muromtsev, Prince G. G. Gagarin, F. F. Kokoshkin (Moscow), E. I. Kedrin, V. D. Nabokov, A. S. Lomshakov (St. Petersburg), V. K. Obninsky (Kaluga), I. P. Aleksinsky, K. K. Chernosvitov and M. G. Komissarov (Vladimir). A part of the record of zemstvo activity, as Witte pointed out in his memorandum, indicated a fundamental political antagonism to autocracy.

True that those associated with "liberalism", or who took issue with central administration in zemstvo affairs were not always committed idealists. In "liberal" Tver', for instance, S. Kvashin Samarin (never a liberal) was among those who sided with the liberal party led by I. I. Petrunkevich. This made the opposition to the policies of central government divided and often weak. Thus, when in 1897-1900, in Tver', I. I. Petrunkevich called upon his friends and sympathizers to condemn the nomination of the provincial zemstvo council, and to refuse to co-operate with the council, he received little outright support. Those associated with his faction argued that though nomination was disagreeable, the civil servant concerned had acted in accord with the laws and that little could be done.

In fact, attempts by liberals to mobilize support often left many professionals (primarily concerned with security and salary) quite unmoved. Thus, in the Tver' zemstvo at this

time, when the zemstvo council of 1897-1900 victimized a senior insurance worker with liberal affiliations, there were many resignations. But the core of the agencies continued to function, and there was no sympathetic action among zemstvo insurance agents.

It is equally true, however, that liberals could be bold with what little support they did have, and that this complicated local administration, even if it could basically proceed with many of its activities. The crisis in Tver', referred to above, again provides a suitable instance. When in 1897-1900, the provincial zemstvo council was nominated—there was so much time devoted to that matter by the assembly that day to day matters could not be decided.

Zemstvo liberals also publicly announced their views, indicating that even those respected by society under Autocracy were opposed to the existing government system. During 1878-1881 and 1894, a number of petitions were forwarded to the central administration, calling for the consultation of popular representatives in the everyday work of central government.²⁷

Such tendencies disturbed central government officials. The range of activity of the zemstva was broad and the numbers of zemstvo professionals were growing. There were many "Populists" active in zemstvo service, and constitutionalists were now leaning towards more radical groups—such as Struve's Legal Marxists.²⁸

By the end of the 1890s, these tensions assumed a new aspect. Ministers of Central government were contemplating fundamental changes in the powers of rating at the disposal of the zemstva. This was by no means popular within local government circles. When eventually, steps were taken over the matter, by a law of June 1901, there was considerable resentment. During a conversation with the local government activist, D. Shipov, in 1902, Witte was to mention the issue as one of those around which zemstvo opposition to the centre focused.

At the end of the 1890s, the problem of zemstvo power to rate was very much at the forefront of central thinking about the provincial self-government bodies. Both Witte and Pobedonostsev were intent on limiting the powers the bodies had, whether the latter approved or not. At the time, the zemstva possessed the right to levy rate without limit, over different categories of immovable property. These included immovable property in the country areas and townships, dwellings and woodland. Rate was to be levied in accordance with

the market value of the property and the income it brought.

The zemstva also received a sum from the payments made on trade and industrial licenses, though the % they could take of these payments was fixed. Both Pobedonostsev and Witte considered these powers excessive. Thus, while Pobedonostsev railed against the unruliness zemstva introduced into central government, he also noted that they impaired :

“...the indispensable fixedness and capacity for regulation of economic affairs...”

Clearly the Minister considered that central planning was impossible given existing zemstvo authority. In his memorandum to the Tsar, Witte complained of the recent high expenditure by the zemstva—a clear criticism of the financial system that permitted it.

Such complaints were to be expected in central circles. The principle of rate power without limit had been questioned in St. Petersburg for some time. A commission meeting in 1885-1890 had decided that some limit had to be established. By the mid-1890s, the problem had become more acute. In 1894, the British Consul in St. Petersburg noted the following concern of central authorities :

“According to the opinion expressed in the Report of the Minister of Internal Affairs, on the financial position of the zemstva, it will very soon be necessary to place at the disposal of the territorial bodies some new source of revenue, seeing that already in 10 provinces, zemstvo rate reaches 10-20%, in 5 provinces 20%, in the province of Perm 30% of the productivity of the land”.

In 1899, the State Council commented that it was necessary to place different sources of revenue at the disposal of the zemstva and required the Minister of Finances to report on the matter.²⁹

Many zemstvo men were relatively unconcerned. They considered that their powers were being used well (for the prosperity of the population). Zemstva increased their rates over the 1890s, showing their lack of concern for the centre's views. Zemtsy were devoted to their powers over taxation : they were the only manipulable independent financial source at their disposal. Many zemstvo workers and professionals considered welfare work in the countryside to be of fundamental social importance. Having seen the stark problems of peasants

during the Famine of 1891-1892, and the cholera epidemic of 1892-1893, they were concerned to find some solution to peasant poverty and ignorance. In these conditions, the desire to maintain and increase rates—in order to assist the peasant was not unusual.

Central government officials could not ignore the behaviour of these zemtsy. Zemstvo rating cut into the Empire's tax base at the very time when the central administration itself was seeking more funds,⁸⁰ with minimum burden to the tax payer. Moreover, given the careful financial policy and stimulation of industry that Witte had been following, he was bound to resent the power in the hands of the zemstva to levy rates without limit (affecting industrial immoveable property as any other). This was especially so when the zemstva showed their intention to use the powers extensively. The Minister had already shown his desire to exercise control over zemstvo funds. Early in his term, he had required all zemstvo funds to be kept in state treasuries (with payment being made by the zemstva). Witte furthermore emphasized his reservations on welfare expenditure in his Budget Report for 1897. He remarked on this occasion that :

“... the desire to extend the activity of government for the good of the population deserves every sympathy of course. It is excusable to some extent under the conditions in our country—a country comparatively young in culture and developing rapidly. But if the needs are innumerable, the means of satisfying them are limited.”

By 1899, Witte was busying himself with the task of steering a measure through the State Council which would place a limit on the amount by which the zemstva could increase their rates : they were not to be permitted to levy more than a fixed percentage of what they had levied in immediately previous years.

The result of such conflicts was a situation of considerable tension between zemstva and central government by 1901. Specific issues of complaint, rather than broader ideological concerns, were frequently the source of such tension. Certainly, “liberals” of the intelligentsia frequently found themselves in absolute agreement with the opponents of governmental policy, but this did not imply that the major part of the assemblies

would sympathise wholly with the aims of these intelligentsia. In Tver' province, in the provincial zemstvo, I. I. Petrunkevich and A. A. Bakunin, leading a well established liberal faction

Appendix Table 1

(Source : B. B. Veselovskiy, *Istoriya Zemstva za sorok let. Vol. 1*)

Province	Doctors	Hospitals	Non-specialists	
			1*	2**
Bessarabia	52	39	55	1
Vladimir	71	23	59	3
Vologda	31	32	88	57
Voronezh	69	43	164	1
Vyatka	73	59	119	61
Ekaterinoslav	66	56	161	—
Kazan	57	44	70	2
Kaluga	46	33	37	—
Kostroma	47	35	67	21
Kursk	96	33	32	—
Moscow	112	87	2	1
Nizhniy	43	27	46	8
Novgorod	61	47	81	38
Olonets	27	22	78	37
Orel	59	45	64	—
Penza	34	21	58	8
Perm	89	67	75	11
Poltava	111	74	258	2
Pskov	45	23	59	11
Ryazan	61	35	34	11
Samara	81	62	47	—
Saratov	92	59	98	3
St. Petersburg	57	48	75	5
Simbirsk	44	37	99	1
Smolensk	62	34	22	3
Tauride	75	42	112	8
Tambov	77	58	93	9
Tver'	79	52	32	5
Tula	49	30	11	—
Ufa	42	24	35	4
Khar'kov	86	59	155	48
Kherson	81	53	50	—
Chernigov	114	47	199	14
Yaroslavl	44	17	45	17

*fel'dsher **midwife

Appendix Table 2

Source : B. B. Veselovskiy, *Istoriya zemstva za sorok let, Vol. 1 Treatment Centres for cattle, in 1906.*

Kostroma	9
Voronezh	19
Kursk	2
Tambov	4
Saratov	17
Tula	1
Vladimir	7
Moscow	10
St. Petersburg	8
Tver'	2
Poltava	9
Kherson	19
Pskov	3
Smolensk	projected
Bessarabia	2
Chernigov	6
Vyatka	5
Novgorod	5
Nizhniy	3
Ufa	1
Tauride	2
Ekaterinoslav	2
Khar'kov	3
Samara	Projected
Perm	3

The major period of growth in several provinces Saratov, Moscow, Petersburg, Novgorod, Ekaterinoslav, Samara, was between 1900 and 1906.

in the zemstvo assembly, were able to find considerable support for attacking central government policies or zemstvo taxation : they were also able to find support for an attack on the incompetence of the executive council (*uprava*) in insurance matters. But less support was forthcoming when they called for boycott of the council's activities on the basis that it was a nominated council, appointed partly by the Governor, and did not merit the support of the assembly. What was considered important by liberal leaders, and what was generally acceptable to those opposed to central government action clearly did not coincide always.²¹

Nor do the limitations of the intelligentsia in zemstva, or the limitations of the "Liberals" specifically, make the rise of the zemstvo opposition—the less important. For the rise of such an opposition, which was substantially the result of central government policy (no matter how well grounded that policy might have been), led to a government crisis of importance. It could also lead to the growth of discontent in the rural areas. For Zemstvo functionaries, even if not always the conscience keepers of the public, were men of substance and significance: their ideas and prejudices were not to be easily ignored.

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10. *Vysochayshe utverzhdannaya kommissiya dlya peresmotra ustava o sluzhbe grazhdanskoy*, *Zhurnal*, 1896, April. *Entsiklopedicheskiy Slovar'* (Granat), op.cit. Note 1. V. I. Gessen, *Voprosy mestnago upravleniya* (St. Petersburg 1904) Prince Urussov, *Memoirs of a Russian Governor*, (London, 1908). *Krasnyy Arkhiv*, op.cit., Note 15. And V. I. Gurko op.cit., for indications of the lack of faith confidence in the bureaucracy.
11. B. B. Veselovskiy op.cit. esp. Vol. 4 of the "Istoriya".
12. *Archives de la Ministere des Affaires Etrangeres, Correspondence consulaire of commorale*, St. Petersburg. Vol. 51. N. A. Egiazarova, op.cit. [See Table on the impact of the Depression]. A. Anfimov, *Krupnoe Pomeschich'e Khozyaystvo Evropeiskoy Rossii* (Moscow 1969), pp. 88-90.
13. House of Commons Bills and Reports. Consular Reports for Russia, 1894, 1895, 1896, 1897, 1898.
14. B. B. Veselovskiy. *Istoriya*. op.cit. *passim*. I. P. Belokonskiy. *Derevenskie Vpechatleniya* (St. Petersburg 1905) S. Berov *Na vrachebrom postu V zemstve* (Paris 1961). Many of the stories of A. P. Chekhov touch on this aspect of life in zemstva. See especially *Po delam sluzhb*.
15. The "class organizations" referred to are the organizations of the "official classes"- "noble" "bourgeois" and "peasant." Information on government is from I. P. Eroshkin, op.cit. pp. 235 ff. Also *Entsiklopedicheskiy Slovar'* (Brockhaus), article *Uchilishchnye Sovety*.
16. I. P. Eroshkin, op.cit. The Empire's appellate structure is clear from his charts.
17. *Vysochayshe unhzhdennoe osoboe soveshchanie o nuzhdakh sel'skhozyayst-vennoy promyshlennosti. Svod trudov mestnykh Komitetov. Zemstvo*. (St. Petersburg 1904). Many zemtsy were present.
18. I. P. Belokonskiy, *Zemskoe Dvizhenie, Byloe*. op.cit. and S. Galai, op.cit. p. 43.
19. B. B. Veselovskiy, op. cit. *Istoriya*. Vol. 1.
20. Ibid. Vol. 4, in the short case studies of Bessarabian, Tula and Nizhniy zemstva.
21. L. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*. B. N. Chicherin, *Vospominaniya, Zemstvo i Moskovskaya Duma* (Moscow 1934) p. 46.

22. S. Yu. Witte, *Samoderzhavie i Zemstvo* (Stuttgart 1901) pp. 86-87. The debate on efficiency is clear in R. Robbins. *The Famine in Russia, 1891-1892* (Columbia 1975) and V. I. Gurko, *Features and Figures of the Past* (Stanford/Oxford 1939) pp. 56 ff.
23. P. A. Zayonchkovskiy, *Rossiyskoe Samoderzhavie v Kontse XIX Stoletiya* (Moscow, 1870). S. Yu. Witte, *Vospominaniya* (Leningrad 1924) R. Byrnes, *Pobedonostsev. His Life and Thought* (Indiana 1968).
24. P. A. Zayonchkovskiy, *Rossiyskoe Samoderzhavie v kontse XIX Stoletiya* P. 55 and P. 406. (Moscow, 1970) *Krasnyy Arkhiv*, 1928, 5 (30), No. 15. Caution was, in all likelihood shown because of the kind of associations governmental reform could have. When the decree on land captains, for instance, was introduced in Ekaterinoslav province, in 1889-90, there were rumours that it opened a return to the pre-Emancipation system, which led to considerable unrest among the peasantry. See S. Bensidoun, *L'agitation paysanne en Russie de 1881 a 1902* (Paris 1975) and N. M. Pirumova op. cit. p. 40.
25. S. Yu. Witte, op. cit. *Samoderzhavie*.
26. S. F. Starr, *Decentralization and Self Government in Russia* (Princeton 1972) M. V. Islavin, *Obzor Trudov Vysochayshey utverzhdennoy pod predsedatel'stvom Stats-sekrtarya Kakhanava Osoboy Kommissii* (St. Petersburg 1908).
27. B. B. Veselovskiy, op. cit. *Istoriya*, Vol. 4. H. N. Boivich, *Chleny Gosudarstvennoy Dumy, I-ogo I-yy sozyu S. Yu. Witte*, op. cit. *Samoderzhavie*. H. S. Vasudevan, op. cit.
28. P. Miliukov, *Russia in crisis*, (Chicago, 1905), B. B. Veselovskiy op. cit, *Istoriya*, Vol. 3 G. Fischer, op. cit, R. Pipes *Struve, Liberal on the Left* (Harvard 1970). G. Fischer, op. cit.
29. D. Shipov, op. cit. Chapter 6. S. Yu Witte, op cit. *Samoderzhavie*, pp. 160-161 (Note) House of Commons Bills and Reports (hereafter HCBR), Consular Report for 1895, pp. 24 ff. B. B. Veselovskiy, op. cit. *Istoriya*, Vol. I. *Krasnyy Arkhiv*, 1928, 5 (30), No. 15 for Pobedonostsev's statement Zemstvo views on economic policy in N. M. Pirumova, op. cit. pp. 138 ff. and H. S. Vasudevan, *Russian Provincial Politics, Central Government and the Tver' Provincial Zemstvo. 1897-1900*, (Unpublished Cambridge University Ph.D. Thesis, 1978) Chapter 4.
30. *Archives Nationales F12 6602, Ministere Des Affairs, Etrangers, sous-administration des affaires commerciaux au Ministre du Commerce*, 30 July 1898.
31. H. S. Vasudevan op. cit. Chapter 3, Chapter 4.

6

SOCIAL PROTEST OR POLITICS OF BACKWARDNESS ? THE NAMASUDRA MOVEMENT IN BENGAL, 1872-1911

SEKHAR BANDYOPADHYAY

I. Introduction

The importance of caste as an agent for mobilisation or emasculation of a social or political movement is a recognised fact of Indian history, for it is hardly possible to deny the significance of the influence of caste ethics on Indian milieu. In the traditional system of social organisation it determined the interpersonal relationships among the Hindus. And a man's status, in a hierarchical scale of ranking, could also in many cases indicate his economic condition and his share in the social surplus, as each caste was traditionally associated with a particular occupation. However, as each stratum in this hierarchy was dependent on others, the system also provided a guarantee of minimum subsistence for all, including even the bottommost layer. But this caste position was determined by birth and was therefore, at least theoretically, immutable. This often generated tension at the bottom, which clamoured for positional readjustment, as new frontiers of economic opportunities offered possibilities of vertical social mobility. The phenomenon became much more pervasive under British rule which altered the political base of the caste system, while a market economy, operating under the aegis of a colonial government, with marketable land and labour, struck at the economic foundations of the traditional hierarchical, interdependent structure of relationships. Changes in the opportunity structure resulted in further upward mobility leading to articulate caste agitations demanding improvement in ritual position. It is customary to highlight two stages in the development of such movements. In the first phase, they aimed at acquiring the symbols of high status. But then in the second phase, the emphasis is shifted to the more material sources of high status, i.e., education, employ-

ment and political power.¹ But what remains unexplained in this model of interpretation is the element of 'protest' involved in all such movements. Acquiring of symbols or 'Sanskritization', as the term now seems to have been almost universally accepted, need not be taken as mere emulation of the upper castes, for it also meant an 'appropriation' of certain symbols which had so long been the exclusive privileges of a few at the top. And the demand for a share in the economic resources and political power was indeed a challenge to the existing system of their distribution, which even in a changed situation made them virtually a monopoly of the upper castes. But this very aspect of such movements made caste a politically relevant category in an age of institutional politics, operating within the competition-collaboration syndrome. And the colonial government, in its perennial search for friends committed to the continuation of its rule in India, often found in them an enthusiastic ally to be played off against its high caste Hindu adversaries.

The Namasudra movement in Bengal is the story of an *antyaja* or untouchable caste, transforming itself from an amphibious peripheral multitude into a settled agricultural community, protesting against the age-old social disabilities and economic exploitation it suffered from, entering the vortex of institutional politics and trying to derive benefit out of it through an essentially loyalist political strategy. The rapid reclamation of the marshy wastes of eastern Bengal in the nineteenth century provided the hardy Namasudras with an opportunity to better their lot as pioneer cultivators, while previously they lived primarily on boating and fishing, in a region that remained under water for more than six months in a year. As the frontier of cultivation expanded in eastern Bengal, where the major concentration of the Namasudras could be found, they gradually emerged as a settled agricultural community, and the majority of them came to enjoy the status of the peasantry. However, they had among them only a few landowners. For land in this area remained largely in the hands of the high caste gentry, which provided the capital input for reclamation and therefore, appropriated the major share of the surplus generated by the extension of cultivation. Nevertheless, their evolution as a peasant community, relatively better off than before, made the Namasudras conscious of their low ritual position and social degradation, as well as the economic exploitation perpetrated on them by the high caste Hindus. The tiny prosperous section, those few landowners and rich peasants among them, felt the

pinch all the more sharply. The refusal by their caste superiors to recognise their claims to a higher social status, therefore, bred among them and indeed within the entire community—an attitude of defiance to the social authority of the higher castes, and led to the beginning of the Namasudra 'protest' in 1872. Gradually it developed into a well-organised movement for their social upliftment, as the growth of a Vaishnava sect, *Matua*, exclusively among the Namasudras, brought about greater cohesion and solidarity within the community. The sect, hitherto unknown to the scholars on Vaishnavism, provided for an organisational framework, though informal at the initial stage and brought about a symbiosis between the two strata within the Namasudra community. The relatively better-off leadership, that had given articulate form to the spirit of 'protest' in the minds of their poor and illiterate kinsmen, remained effectively tied with them through caste, religious and kinship linkages. Since many of them, irrespective of their material condition, were the members of the same religious sect, there was greater diffusion of ideas from top to the bottom. As the relatively prosperous people became more and more educated at the turn of the century, they began to aspire for greater patronage from the colonial government, which at least theoretically made no distinction of caste. This very aspect of the new regime made it appear, in their perception of history, as a definite improvement over the traditional rule of the discriminating high caste Hindu *Rajas*. Any political movement against this government was, therefore, interpreted as attempts to end this egalitarian rule and bring back the repressive social control of the higher castes. As the British in the early twentieth century recognised the necessity of protective discrimination in favour of the Muslims, it evoked similar expectations in the minds of the informed leaders of the Namasudra community as well. Their movement, also, began to change its content—it no longer remained a pure social movement, but developed separatist political tendencies as well. But the leadership could hardly afford to move without the community, for the backwardness of the community itself now became a political capital for them. Hence they justified their demand for institutional patronage in the name of social justice and could thus effectively mobilise the majority still boiling with a spirit of 'protest'.

These political tendencies became apparent when the Namasudras refused to participate in the nationalist agitation that followed the first partition of Bengal (1905) and actively

opposed it on a number of occasions. The political significance of this non-participation by such an increasingly well-knit caste group becomes clear if we bear in mind that they constituted the largest single Hindu caste group as well as the majority of the Hindu agricultural population in eastern Bengal. The nationalist leadership was conscious of the situation and did in fact make serious attempts to secure the adherence of this peasant caste. But success eluded them, as in this particular case, class contradiction had converged with caste hatred and together they created a barrier which the high caste gentry leadership of the *swadeshi* movement could not surmount; more so, because on the one hand the nationalists could not offer any attractive social or economic programme, while on the other, the barrier was effectively reinforced by the British government which had been systematically giving concessions to this particular community in order to ensure their loyalty and alienate them from the nationalists. The Namasudra movement, as a result, developed two parallel tendencies in the early twentieth century. A 'protest' against the oppressive domination of the high caste landowning indigenous elite ran parallel to an unfaltering allegiance to the patronizing colonial elite. And together, these two tendencies led to the emergence of backward classes politics in Bengal, with the Namasudras as its energetic vanguards as well as the enthusiastic rearguards.

II. Social and Economic Position of the Namasudras

The Namasudras, earlier known as Chandals, lived mainly in the low-lying swamp areas of eastern Bengal. They were most numerous in Bakarganj and Faridpur, as well as in the neighbouring districts of Jessore and Khulna in the west and Dacca and Mymensingh in the north. In 1881, 71 per cent of the Namasudras of Bengal proper lived in these six districts. In 1901, this proportion stood at 75.18 per cent. However, to be more precise, the principal concentration of this caste population could be found in the marshy areas of north-west Bakarganj and south Faridpur, and the adjoining areas of Narail and Magura subdivisions in Jessore, as well as Sadar and Bagerhat subdivisions in Khulna. These four districts contained more than half of the entire Bengali Namasudra population—51.64 per cent in 1881 and 54.15 per cent in 1901. And, therefore, this region may be defined, for the convenience of our study, as the principal Namasudra inhabitation zone. Farther west, however, their number diminished rapidly.²

Among the Hindus of the region, the Namasudras or Chandals occupied a very low social position and were considered as untouchables. Originally a tribe, this community dwelt in this region before the formation of the Brahmanical social order. Later on, however, they entered the fold of Hinduism, imitated the Hindu social organisation and thus hardened into a caste. But this Hinduisation possibly took place at a comparatively late period, when the caste system had taken its fully developed shape and outsiders were admitted reluctantly and only at the bottom of the structure. This explains, to a large extent, the social degradations the Chandals were subjected to. The Sanskrit scholars despised them as an outcaste and helot people, performing menial duties for the Brahmins and described them as *antebasi* or those who lived on the outskirts of the cities. Manu branded them as the "lowest of mankind", who sprang from the illicit union of a Sudra man and a Brahman woman, and whose touch defiles the pure. Their social position does not seem to have improved at all even during the Muslim period, as Abul Fazal in the sixteenth century referred to them as "vile wretches".³

Coming to the more modern period, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we find that a sizeable section among the Namasudras had embraced either Islam or Christianity to avoid the stigma of untouchability.⁴ Those who remained within the fold of the Hindu society were still held to pollute by their touch. The barbers, washermen and sometimes even the scavengers refused their services to them, and for officiating in their religious and social ceremonies, they had their own Brahmins who were disparagingly called *Barna Brahman* or *Chandaler Brahman* and were not received on equal terms by the other members of the priestly caste. In the social feasts, they were required to sit separately and sometimes clear up their own dishes.⁵ The Chandals, it thus appears, were not allowed by Hindu society to enjoy any social privilege whatsoever, since the earliest times when they first came within its fold.

So far as the internal organisation of the caste is concerned, it was divided into a number of endogamous sub-castes. There were about twelve sub-castes among the Chandals of eastern Bengal, six in central and eleven in western Bengal.⁶ Most of these sub-castes were formed on the basis of real or supposed differences of occupation. Each had its place in a graded scale of ranking which had regional variations. The Halwahs or the cultivators in general claimed precedence over

all others.⁷ Each sub-caste had its own *panchayat* or administration which governed the rules of endogamy as well as the norms of social and ritual behaviour of its members. Commensality between the members of different sub-castes was in many areas strictly restricted.⁸ The Chandals of Khulna perhaps offered a notable exception to this general rule. For in this district, not merely was the restriction on commensality ignored, but even intermarriage was allowed between different sections.⁹ However, when the Namasudra movement started much effort was directed towards the elimination of these sectional differences to achieve a horizontal solidarity among the members of the entire caste. The Namasudra leaders had their first conference in Khulna in 1881, where they stressed the need of unity and caste-consciousness as first steps towards social improvement.¹⁰ But the fact that forty years later, another Namasudra leader had to repeat the same thing in his book,¹¹ indicates the survival of sectional differences within the caste, in spite of the efforts of its leaders. But some kind of working solidarity had also been achieved. The internal differences disappeared, as it seems, when the caste as a whole was in confrontation with the outer world and this solidarity was to a great extent the result of an identity of economic interests shared by the majority of the Namasudra community.

The low social position of the Namasudras, in almost all parts of Bengal, coincided with their inferior economic status vis-a-vis the men of the higher castes. Although their traditional occupation was boating and cultivation, they could actually be found in various kinds of professions. They were employed as shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, oilmen, fishermen, clubmen etc.¹² At the beginning of the twentieth century, many of them were industrial workers (about 7.20% of the actual workers), some were traders, and a few were in the higher professions. But the majority of them lived on agriculture—as the census statistics of 1911 show, as much as 77.94 per cent of those who had some occupation were associated with it. And in this sense it won't be wrong to call it an agrarian caste. But more appropriately, perhaps, it should be called a peasant caste. For among this Namasudra agricultural population, only 1.15 per cent were in the rent-receiving category, 3.56 per cent were field labourers, wood-cutters etc., and therefore, about 95.71 per cent approximately were tenant-farmers, enjoying the status of either occupancy or non-occupancy *raiyat*. However, only a few probably had any significant amount of land at their disposal.¹³ The rapid recla-

mation of the swamps and forests of eastern Bengal transformed the Namasudras into a predominantly cultivating community. But since capital input for reclamation came from the *bhadralok* gentry, landowning was largely monopolised by them, mainly by the high caste Hindus, Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidya, and the high class Muslims. The majority of the *zamindars*, independent *talukdars* and intermediary tenure-holders came from their rank.¹⁴ In 1911, for example, in the three eastern Bengal divisions, Dacca, Rajshahi and Chittagong, for which detailed break-up is available, 80.82 per cent of the 'rent-receivers' belonged to these social groups, while Namasudra representation in this category was just 2.14 per cent. If we look at the Hindu segment alone, approximately 56.58 per cent of the rent-receivers in these three divisions were Hindus; of them 66.58 per cent were Brahmin, Kayastha or Baidya by caste, and only 3.78 per cent were Namasudras.¹⁵ Thus the fundamental class dichotomy in Bengal agrarian relations, i.e., between the rent-receivers and the rent-payers, had by and large coincided, in the case of the Namasudras, with the caste hierarchy.

The Namasudra peasantry, however, served as tenants mainly in the marshy or the forest reclamation areas of eastern Bengal, particularly in Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna. Gastrell's report of 1868 on the geographical conditions of Bakarganj, Faridpur and Jessore, shows that the process of reclamation had been progressing steadily since the days of Rennell's survey of these areas. Rennell's map shows that in the years 1764 to 1772 very little land had been brought under cultivation either over the marsh tracts or to the south between them and the Sunderbans, where the major concentration of the Namasudras could actually be found. But since then the marshes were "being fast converted into first-rate rice lands." And by 1868, a little less than 50 per cent of the entire land area of the Sunderbans had been assigned under clearance leases to grantees, who had already cleared and brought under cultivation more than 30 per cent of it.¹⁶ If we look at the particular situation of the districts where the Namasudras were most numerous, in Bakarganj, for example, forest was rapidly retreating before the axe of the colonists and the level of the marshes or *bils* was continuously rising from the annual deposit of silt and their size was, therefore, shrinking as the edges were being brought under cultivation. The construction of the road from Palardi to Ambula, in the heart of the *bils* in Gournadi *thana*, opened up the marshes to

the cultivators and the colonists and brought many fertile areas under plough. As a result, as Jack had calculated, the extension of cultivation in this district had been phenomenal; in 1770, only 56 per cent of the land area was occupied, while in 1905, it rose to 92.5 per cent, the extension being most remarkable in the *thanas* where the Namasudras could be found as tenants. The paucity of information, however, precludes a similar calculation about Faridpur. Nevertheless, according to the rough estimate of Jack, the Settlement Officer of Faridpur, while much less than half of the district was cultivated at the time of the Permanent Settlement, in the year of survey about 80 per cent of its land area was under plough. In Jessore, the proportion of cultivation was most high in Narail (78.29%) and Magura (78.64%) subdivisions, where vast swamps had been reclaimed and brought under cultivation, and these areas, it is important to note, contained the major concentration of the Namasudra peasantry in the district. In Khulna as well, marshes in the north were being steadily converted into rice fields, while forests in the South were being rapidly pushed back.¹⁷

In these reclamation areas, the soil was in general more than ordinarily fertile and productive and being liable to annual inundations was continually rennovated by fresh deposits. In Bakarganj, the *bil* areas in *thanas* Gaurnadi, Jhalakati, Swarupkati, Bhandaria etc., gave excellent paddy crop when the water was not too deep. In Faridpur, the marshy country was suitable only for *aman* or winter crop, but produced very heavily. In Jessore, the reclaimed swamp areas of Narail and Magura subdivisions yielded abundant harvests of rice. And in Khulna, the northern low lands full of *bils*, because of the rich river-silt, contained the best lands for many varieties of coarse paddy and jute.¹⁸ In addition to this, rent was low in these reclaimed areas because of the favourable man-land ratio. In Faridpur and Bakarganj, perhaps the lowest rate of rent could be found in the *bil* areas, where the colonists had to be lured to an uninhabitable country where they had to fight continuously with nature to bring about the extension of cultivation. In Khulna, "privileged rents" were paid in the forest reclamation areas by the original settlers and their descendants.¹⁹ And where the rent was high such as in the swamp areas of Jessore, its burden was offset by the higher returns from the land.²⁰ Even the agricultural wages were high in many of these areas because of the unhealthiness and the low density of population. As the Collector of Jessore reported in 1888, those who were ready to engage for daily wages were much in demand and com-

peted for and a large *jotdar* would offer them strong inducements to settle on his lands and would let them make their own terms²¹. In Khulna, landless labourers were few and well-off, for there was a constant exodus of labour towards the Sunderbans where there was a large demand for it.²²

The situation described above does not, however, indicate a general prosperity for the entire Namasudra peasant population residing in these areas. For the average size of holding was rather small, being 1.39 acre in Faridpur and 2.51 in Bakarganj. The largest holdings, it is true, could be found in the *bil* areas; but even here, their size did not exceed 4 acres. And in Jessore, for which no such detailed information is available, the gross cultivated area per head of agricultural population was 1.5 acre, while the net area was 1.2 acre only.²³ As a result, in many of these areas, particularly in Faridpur, the cultivators had to purchase at least a quarter of the rice they needed for subsistence. A general feature of this district was, therefore, the importation of rice, the price of which was continuously rising in the first decade of the twentieth century.²⁴ Apart from these, there were other factors as well, affecting the condition of the *raiyats*. The very process of reclamation led to subinfeudation, an elaboration of the tenurial structure and the consequent pressure on the tenantry at the bottom.²⁵ Fixity of rent was a rare phenomenon in the marshy tracts, where the frontier of the cultivated area had been continually shifting. And quite often, if not always, the peasants had to pay *abwabs* or illegal cesses imposed by their landlords.²⁶ But what was most distressing to them was the growing trend, after 1870, of converting the low cash rent-paying tenures into *barga* tenures and later *dhankarari* tenures, paying a high produce rent. The valuation of such produce rent was much higher than the previous cash rents and the Namasudra peasantry was forced to agree to this conversion without any process of law, but by the threat of eviction. Areas under produce rent, it is true, were not very large—only 2 per cent in Jessore, 5 per cent in Bakarganj and about 8 per cent in Faridpur at the turn of the century. But it was a typical feature of the regions where the Namasudras served as tenants.²⁷ And indebtedness was a natural corollary. In Faridpur, it was an important factor affecting the condition of the *raiyats*. In Jessore, the problem might have been a little less acute, but nevertheless present. In Bakarganj, although permanent indebtedness was not a general feature, the amount of short-term borrowing was considerable and the terms onerous.²⁸ The economic condition of the majority of the Namasudra peasantry

was depressed as a consequence, resulting in hatred towards the landowning classes and also in the process, towards the upper ranks in the caste hierarchy. In areas beyond their main inhabitation zone, in western Bengal for example, the Namasudras were even worse off, living mainly as *raiya*s, share-croppers, day-labourers, mill-hands or sometimes in extreme cases as bonded labourers. Although they had among them a few rent-receivers, their number being just 2,612 in the entire western and central Bengal in 1911, (this broad area included Jessore and Khulna which were within the main inhabitation zone), the average Namasudra could not even perceive of land being owned by any one else other than a high caste Hindu *bhadralok*.²⁹

However, towards the end of the nineteenth century a minority of the Namasudras had become prosperous, by taking advantage of reclamation of the forest and marshy tracts in Faridpur and Bakarganj, and in a lesser degree in the neighbouring districts as well. Sometimes the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* landlords could not personally supervise the outlying areas of their estates, leaving the Namasudra and Muslim colonists in a better position to bargain for the security of their tenures, establish their actual control over the land and thus appropriate a greater share of the agricultural surplus thus generated through extension of cultivation. In the process, some of them achieved fairly comfortable status. A Namasudra big peasant or a cultivating tenure-holder in Bakarganj or Faridpur or a Namasudra *ganthidar* in Jessore was not a rare phenomenon in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century.³⁰

With the coming of jute cultivation, these people who had already some surplus, made further profits from the high prices of the new cash crop. When Gastrell wrote his report in 1868, there was a widespread misconception that the cultivation of jute impoverished the soil and hence the *raiya*s selected only those lands that were annually renovated by the inundation deposits of the rainy season. Subsequently, however, the cultivators discovered that jute did not impoverish the soil to that extent and consequently the crop was grown in larger areas, mainly in the marshy tracts, which were considered to be most suitable for this purpose, of northern Bakarganj and southern Faridpur, as well as Narail and Magura subdivisions of Jessore and the northern low lands of Khulna. These areas, it should be pointed out, fell squarely within the main Namasudra inhabitation zone. The cultivators, however, could not reap the full benefit out of this new cash crop. They did not, as a rule, sell directly to the jute

firms, but to the middlemen or *byaparis* at less than the market price. The marketing mechanism was thus dominated by the *byaparis* or dealers who collected the crop at local *hats* or by travelling in boats around the villages and appropriated the bulk of the profit from its sale. The primary producers were in the process deprived of their legitimate share. But as the price of jute was rising sharply and rapidly in the last years of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth centuries, till about 1913, it would not be fully unjustified to suppose a betterment of the condition of the primary producers as well, resulting in further prosperity for the well-to-do Namasudra peasants.³¹ And what is more important to note is that many of the Namasudras themselves could be found operating as *byaparis* or engaged in other forms of river-borne trade. Quite a few were engaged in salt-trade of eastern Bengal, while money-lending became an additional source of income for many of them.³² Later on, young members of such prosperous families became educated, joined the higher professions and added further to the wealth of their families.³³

The available statistics, however, suggest that those who were really prosperous formed only a tiny minority within the entire Namasudra community and were definitely not rich enough to be at par with the high caste Hindu gentry or the Muslim wealthy classes. In the census of 1891, in the district of Faridpur, out of 1,53,628 Namasudras who had some occupation, only 57 or .04 per cent were returned as "Land occupants, not cultivating" and 2,935 or 1.9 per cent as "Land occupants, cultivating".³⁴ Twenty years later, in 1911, only .89 per cent of the Namasudra earners in the whole of Bengal had any income from rent. But possibly not many of them had more than a hundred *bighas* of land under occupation.³⁵ In the same year, about 3.83 per cent of the Namasudra earners were engaged in trade and 1.04 per cent could be found in the higher professions. But the all-encompassing latter category includes varieties of professionals, ranging from gazetted officers, doctors, lawyers and teachers down to clerks, cashiers, and managers of landed estates. Therefore, to be more specific about their representation in the 'higher professions' in the usual sense of the category, it may be mentioned that they had among them only 3 gazetted and 187 non-gazetted employees in the public administrative services, 30 commissioned and gazetted officers in the public force and about 1,112 doctors, teachers and lawyers.³⁶ Twenty years later, in 1931, this caste could boast of 17 gazetted officers, 767 non-gazetted government employees and 4,263 lawyers, doctors and

teachers.³⁷ But in the meantime the population had also increased from 1,826,139 in 1911 to 2,094,936 in 1931. Improvement in absolute numbers, therefore, does not indicate any betterment in proportions. And it would not be, therefore, an exaggeration to say that these upwardly mobile sections were of relatively moderate means and remained in a true sense a microscopic minority, being even less than 2 per cent of the entire caste population in 1911.³⁸ All the Namasudras, it thus appears, did not enjoy identical economic status. In course of the nineteenth century, it is true, there had been a relative improvement in the material condition of the majority of this caste population, in the sense, that they had emerged as a settled peasant community, definitely not living at the level of starvation. Yet only a few had any sizeable amount of surplus in their hands. The vertical divisions among them were, therefore, not yet wide enough to produce class tension within the community. A group solidarity could easily be forged on the basis of a community consciousness.

III. Growth of Caste Consciousness and the Beginning of the Social Protest

An articulate caste consciousness cut across the divisions that existed within the Namasudra community and brought about a caste solidarity that had successfully absorbed, at least for the time being, the inchoate class distinctions within it. The small group of people, who had moved up economically, were not yet strong enough to lose their social links with the less fortunate majority with which they were closely-tied through the bonds of caste, kinship and religion. In the consciousness of the vast Namasudra peasant population as well, this group, which had risen from the same circumstances, was considered as an integral part of their own community, as opposed to the high caste Hindu gentry, representing clearly an outside economic and social control. By way of explaining Muslim communalism in terms of agrarian relations in eastern Bengal, it has been recently suggested that "Muslim rent-receivers, where they did exist, were considered part of the peasant community whereas Hindu zamindars and talukdars were not."³⁹ The same logic is perhaps more appropriately applicable to the Namasudras. For first of all, the group of wealthy people among the Namasudras was much smaller in size than that of the Muslim 'rent-receivers'. Secondly, the income differential between the Namasudra pea-

santry on the one hand, and this relatively more prosperous minority on the other was probably much less than that between their counterparts among the Muslims. To this may be added the fact, that the income and status distinctions between the Namasudra peasantry and their more well-off caste brothers were relatively insignificant compared with those between the former and the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* of the region. For there still existed a gulf of difference, both in terms of economic status and social position, between the latter and the Namasudra big peasants and tenure-holders occupying usually the bottom of an elaborate tenurial structure. Even those who had been educated and gone into higher professions were numerically so small and socially, as well as politically, so unintegrated with the high caste Hindu educated community, because of their low ritual position, that they could not evolve a separate social identity or totally cut off their ties with the peasant society they came from. As a result, those among the Namasudras who had accumulated some economic surplus in their hands, remained closely and effectively integrated with the majority of the Namasudra agriculturists and successfully developed among them an articulate (sometimes even militant) caste consciousness that eventually led to a well-organised movement for their social and economic regeneration and ultimately to a form of political separatism, when the leadership developed a kind of vested interest in the backwardness of the community and therefore, tried to mobilise it more vigorously for their movement.

The newly prosperous Chandals, in the late nineteenth century, had started feeling a large gap still existing between their recently achieved higher economic status and the continuing low social position. The paradox became more glaring in their eyes as they increasingly came under the influence of different heterodox religious sects. A large number of Chandals had embraced Vaishnavism which, at least theoretically, made no formal distinction between castes.⁴⁰ Around the middle of the nineteenth century, the *Kartabhajas*, a deistical sect which repudiated idolatry and caste, also seem to have had a remarkable influence over the Chandals living in the swamp areas of Faridpur and north-east Bakarganj. In this area, once again, the missionary efforts to spread Christianity was most successful.⁴¹ All these religious ideas which preached equality of man, made the Chandals, the richer section among them more particularly, conscious of the social disabilities they had been subjected to by the Hindu society. This consciousness led to the Chandal movement of 1872-73, which later gradually developed into a widespread

agitation for the elevation of their social status, in the early twentieth century.

This initial Chandal movement started sometime in late 1872. It had no political significance at that time and was only "an effort made by them to raise themselves in the social scale among the Hindus".⁴² The immediate occasion was the *sradh* ceremony of the father of a well-to-do Chandal headman of village Amgram in Bakarganj. Members of the higher castes, at the instigation of the Kayasthas, refused to accept the invitation and dine in the house of a Chandal whose women visited the market places and who were employed as scavengers in jails for removing filth and everything unclean. A meeting of all the Chandal headmen was called immediately and the following resolutions were adopted :

- (1) women must not in future visit *hats* and *bazars* ;
- (2) service of no kind whatever be taken with other castes ;
- (3) food prepared by all other Hindu castes, other than Brahmins, was not to be pertaken of.

Their demand of equal treatment in jails between the Chandal criminals and criminals of other castes, was also duly communicated to the government officials visiting the locality. The organisers were alive to the problem of the poorer Chandals who were likely to suffer as a result of the no-work programme. Hence, as a safeguard, it was decided that their relatives should support them, and in case of there being no relative, the village community could do the same. But if, in spite of that, anybody refused to join the movement, he or she was threatened with social ostracism. To ensure participation further, it was publicly announced by beat of drum in the important *hats*, that it was the government which had issued orders for the observance of the above resolutions.⁴³

As a result, the movement spread rapidly over a wide region comprising the swamp country south of Faridpur and north-west Bakarganj as well as the adjoining areas of Jessore. The epicentre, however, shifted to the district of Faridpur and was located chiefly in Muksudpur and Gopalganj *thanas*.⁴⁴ So complete was the strike, that about four months after its commencement, the Magistrate of Faridpur, in course of his tour in the affected areas, found "the fields . . . untilled, the houses unthatched, and not a Chandal in the service of Hindu or Mahamadan, or a Chandal woman in any market."⁴⁵ The situation

was so volatile in Muksudpur and Gopalganj, that extra police had to be mobilised from the divisional headquarter for maintaining peace and order.⁴⁶

But during this time the movement was also showing signs of weakness, as the poorer Chandals found it difficult to sustain it any longer.⁴⁷ And as they returned one by one to their old jobs, they had to submit to worse terms than they had before the strike took place.⁴⁸ Their main social grievances also remained unredressed. The higher castes still refused to accept food and water from their hands. And the government preferred not to interfere with an ageold practice of employing the Chandal criminals in conservancy duties in jails,⁴⁹ although henceforth, they were only to be persuaded and not to be forced to do so.⁵⁰

After this first unsuccessful attempt to raise their social status by using pressure tactics, the Chandal leaders concentrated more on internal organisation for developing a community consciousness, more firmly rooted in the minds of all classes of their caste members. And this they tried to achieve initially through religion. Harichand Thakur (originally Biswas), coming from a Vaishnavite Chandal rich peasant family of Orakandi in Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur, organised a new sect known as *Matua*. Being a more liberalised form of Vaishnavism, it repudiated casteism, assumed a congregational nature and acknowledged equal rights for all men and women. Initially, Harichand collected his devotees from among the Chandals of the neighbouring villages, who flocked to him to escape social degradation. The higher caste Vaishnavas refused to have any social interaction with the members of this new sect and this resulted in further solidarity within the latter group.⁵¹

In 1887 Harichand died and his son Guruchand became the new preceptor. He formalised the doctrines of the sect to suit the social needs of an emerging peasant community, and under his stewardship it continuously grew in popularity. The *Matua* sect did not accept casteism or the hegemony of the Brahmins. Water could be had from the hands of any individual who had a "pure character". No other social distinction among men was recognised. Guruchand advised his disciples to stay in family and perform the *Garhsthya dharma* or the responsibilities of a family man. This family life was to be regulated with strict sexual discipline. Chastity of women and proper sexual behaviour by men were emphasized, so that the Namasudras might appear respectable in the eyes of the larger settled agricultural community around them. But what is more

important, Guruchand, unlike the preceptors of other monotheistic sects, preached a sort of work ethics, attuned to the needs of the day and requirements of a socially ambitious community. Educate yourself, earn money and be respectable, were his three principal pieces of advice to the disciples. The congregational character of the sect was also retained. The devotees were encouraged to build temples of *Hari* in every locality where everyday they were supposed to assemble to sing devotional songs or *Kirtans* and worship the lord. No other formal ritual was prescribed for the members of the *Matua* sect, except this regular worshipping of *Hari*. But at this stage, as it seems, *Hari*, the lord and *Hari*, the first preceptor, had virtually been identified.⁵² On the whole, however, the fatherhood of God and *Guru* and the brotherhood of men, seem to have been the two cardinal principles of the *Matua* sect.

Gradually this sect attracted more and more devotees from the Namasudra population of Faridpur, Bakarganj, Dacca, Khulna, Jessore and Tippera districts.⁵³ And the influential Namasudras, therefore, decided to use this religious platform for organising a social protest against their degraded condition. Guruchand with his firm control over the disciples, became the leader of this social movement and Orakandi virtually became its headquarter.

The first and foremost demand articulated through this movement was for the recognition of their more honourable appellation 'Namasudra' in place of the despised 'Chandal'.⁵⁴ Attempts at 'Sanskritization' initially took the shape of a claim to Brahmin origin and fabrication of legends that sought to explain their loss of Brahmin status in terms of evil manipulations of the Hindu Kings.⁵⁵ Later on they began to 'appropriate' social symbols that had previously been the hall marks of high status of the purer castes. They had already forbidden their women from visiting the markets and refused to accept menial jobs and serve the higher castes. Now child-marriage and widow-celibacy began to grow in popularity. In 1911, 22.2 per cent of the Namasudra girls in the age-group of 5-12 years, were either married or widows, the proportion being much higher than that among the traditional higher castes.⁵⁶ And the *sradh* or funeral ceremony was held, like the twice-born castes, on the eleventh day of mourning.⁵⁷ But parallel to this, signs of westernization were also discernible in their behaviour, because to the enlightened sections of the community the reference category was not the traditional Brahmin, but the high caste urban educated elite that had been talking at that time of various social

reforms. Hence these people also began to speak about the evils of child-marriage and the lamentable plight of the widows.⁵⁸ Harichand had realised that illiteracy and ignorance were the roots of all degradation the Namasudra masses suffered from and had, therefore, instructed his son to work for the education of the members of his caste. Guruchand, a farsighted man as he was, could also understand that in order to be socially uplifted the Namasudras must have education, for education begets wealth and without surplus wealth no caste can move up in social scale. And he was realist enough to understand that without the assistance of the ruling authorities they could not hope to achieve this goal.⁵⁹

The first step towards the spread of education was taken in 1880, when a *pathsala* was founded in Orakandi exclusively for the purpose of educating the Namasudra children⁶⁰ Later, towards the beginning of the twentieth century, fresh efforts were made in various other districts, sometimes with the help of Christian missionaries.⁶¹ But the progress remained slow. In 1901 only 3.3 per cent of the Namasudras were literate and in 1911, it rose to only 4.9 per cent.⁶² Some of these educated Namasudras also made their way into the new world of higher professions, although their number, as it has been already mentioned, was really very insignificant. One of the reasons for such slow progress in the field of education and profession, as the Namasudras believed, was the competition they had to face from the better equipped members of the higher castes.⁶³ Hence they began to think that they deserved special privileges to make good the handicap they suffered from as a result of centuries of social discrimination and economic exploitation. This bred a kind of political separatism among them and brought them closer to the British government. The educated Namasudras in this way began to drift away from the mainstream of nationalist politics and the backwardness of the community was made into a political capital by this upwardly mobile section, trying to carve out a place for themselves in the new competitive world of professions and institutional politics.

However, these well-to-do people, by using their caste and religious linkages and by speaking against the high caste *zamin-dari* oppression in the countryside, could also successfully mobilise the Namasudra peasantry, already prepared to shake off the social and economic dominance of the upper castes. To achieve greater solidarity within the caste, a number of meetings to discuss different social questions were held between 1881 and 1930, at different Namasudra villages⁶⁴ and *Namasudra Hitai-*

shini Samiti was started in Dacca in February, 1902, as a formal organisation to co-ordinate the entire movement.⁶⁵ The first of these 'uplift meetings', as they were popularly known, was held in 1881 in the house of Ishwar Gayen, a Namasudra Zamindar of village Duttadanga in the Mollarhat *thana* of Khulna district. It was presided over by Guruchand himself, and was addressed by sixteen other local leaders from different districts. Self-respect and self-confidence to be promoted through self-help and self-reliance were the main subjects of deliberation, and as a follow up measure, it was decided, that such meetings should be held regularly.⁶⁶ A series of other meetings followed hereafter. The call to awake to the new day, and to take advantage of the widening horizon of opportunities thrown open to everyone irrespective of caste and status, the need of education both for boys and girls, the evils of early marriage, the plaint and plea of the widows, the new ideal of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men, were the subjects that furnished material for several hours of speech-making. Attendance sometimes reached upto two thousand. Funeral feasts often provided the occasion for holding such meetings. The funeral ceremonies in prosperous households were followed by funeral feasts, where sometimes thousands of people were fed. And it became "customary" to hold a great uplift meeting then, before the people could scatter again to their villages. We find reference to one such meeting held sometime in 1910, in the house of a wealthy Namasudra, Ram Charan Poddar of Khulna, after the funeral ceremony of his mother. The meeting began at 3 in the afternoon. Speech followed speech, voicing their newborn hopes and aspirations. Evening fell, flickering oil-lamps were hung around the huge tent and the meeting continued well after 9 o'clock in the night.⁶⁷ But along with such informal, and sometimes *im promptu* local gatherings, more formal conferences were held periodically and in their Jessore conference in 1908, it was resolved that the Namasudra conference would be made permanent and yearly meetings would be organised in different districts for the discussion of their social problems and the spread of education. Village committees were to be formed in every Namasudra village and fifteen such villages would constitute a union. To supervise the work of all such local bodies, there would be a district committee in every district. To raise a permanent Namasudra fund, all such committees at various levels would be authorized to collect subscriptions. A handful of rice had to be set aside before meals in every family and collected

weekly by the village committees. Every member of the village committees was supposed to pay a monthly subscription of one *anna*, of unions two *annas* and of district committees four *annas*. Three per cent of the expenses incurred in *sradh*, marriage and other ceremonies in every Namasudra family had to be donated to this fund. Apart from this, measures were also advocated for social reform. It was resolved that "any Namasudra marrying his son under 20 or daughter under 10 will be excommunicated".⁶⁸ However, to what extent this programme was carried out we do not know.

The organisation of the *Matua* sect, needless to say, provided further opportunities for social mobilisation and helped evolve an articulate community consciousness. Local preachers, like Gopal Sadhu of village Lakshmikhali and Ramani Gosain of Khulna district, Bicharan Gosain of village Taltala in Gopalganj police station of Faridpur, Nakul Sadhu of Gazirhat in Jessore and Bipin Goswami of village Kenabhanga in Barisal, gathered around them hundreds of devotees. And the *Baruni mela*, their most popular religious festival held on the last day of the Bengali month *Chaitra* (i.e. in April) at different places, most important among them being Orakandi and Lakshmikhali, attracted thousands of devotees and provided opportunities for greater interaction among them across localities. A *Matuakhali Ashram* was opened in the district town of Khulna, where Namasudra students, coming from poor peasant families, could stay and continue their studies. And later in 1932, the initiative of Gopal Sadhu gave the sect a formal organisational framework in the shape of *Hari-Guruchand Mission*, through which the upper echelon of the community could effectively reach the bottom.⁶⁹ Ideas born at the top could thus easily percolate downward. And the preparedness at the bottom to defy the age-old authority of the upper castes provided those at the top with a broader mass base to organise a movement in furtherance of their own ideas.

Never in the past, could the Namasudras fully identify themselves, socially or culturally, with the high caste Hindus. As the Muslims had already developed a social and cultural identity of their own and distinct from that of the Hindus,⁷⁰ so did the Namasudras, to some extent, vis-a-vis the high caste Hindus. Exposure to education, even of a minority, made them conscious of the social disabilities and economic discrimination, they had been subjected to in the past centuries. Colonial regime by contrast seemed to be more open and egalitarian. This created among them a different perception of history vis-a-vis that of the

nationalists. As the nationalists glorified the traditional past as something like a golden age that was lost with the establishment of British rule, the Namasudras considered the colonial regime an improvement over the past. For there was no more the oppressive and contemptuous rule of the Hindu Rajas, so that even the Sudras could now read the Vedas. The generous English made no distinction of caste and offered equal opportunities and equal protection of law to everybody, high and low. And hence, in this egalitarian rule, anyone could have education, acquire wealth and rise thereby in social status.⁷¹ *Pataka*, a Namasudra paper, published in 1916 a revealing editorial which stated :

“... We had been put to sleep by the blind Hindu Kings who ruled over Hindu society. To-day we have woken up from that slumber through the grace of the mighty British, who believe in the equality of men and not in caste...”⁷²

Any movement to overthrow this regime was, therefore, interpreted as attempt to put the clock back—as endeavours to revive the power of the high caste Hindus and reimpose their oppressive control over the society. And this consciousness, first born at the top, could easily filtrate downward, where there was already in existence a deep-rooted hatred and an attitude of defiance towards the authority of the higher castes.

This feeling of attachment to the colonial rule was also to a large extent due to the influence of the Christian missionaries, who had long been trying through their philanthropic activities to win over such depressed communities, the “human debris of India”, as the Bishop of Madras described them.⁷³ As the high caste educated people dashed their hopes of an expansion of Christianity, it was “the pariah community, and not the Brahmin”, that began to occupy “the position of highest strategic value” for such missionary activities.⁷⁴ In eastern Bengal, during the famine of 1906, the areas which were most affected were the marshy regions of Faridpur and Bakarganj. The worst sufferers were the poorer classes of peasants who had no ploughs or land of their own and the poorer high caste *bhadralok* who depended for their livelihood entirely upon a small patrimony. The *Swadesh Bandhab Samiti* under the guidance of Aswini Kumar Dutta organised relief work in the famine-stricken areas. But while the *swadeshi* relief fund, as it has been alleged, “was largely used for the benefit of the ‘bhadralok’ classes,” the Christian missionaries both Catholic and Protestant, did exce-

llent work among the distressed Namasudra peasants of the *bil* tracts, in co-operation with the government officials.⁷⁵ This naturally brought the missionaries closer to the Namasudras. But closest to them was perhaps a particular Australian Baptist missionary, Dr. C. S. Mead. The Orakandi school which had started with humble resources on a plot of land, donated by Guruchand himself, needed further financial assistance for sustenance, as the Kayastha *zamindar* of the locality refused to help. Appeals were, therefore, sent to Mead, then stationed at the district headquarter of Faridpur. Orakandi being "the most influential centre of the Namasudra world," the missionary felt that "this strategic centre should be occupied".⁷⁶ In a meeting held at Orakandi in early 1905, Mead promised to help and pleaded for a piece of land, both for opening a school and a mission. Although the elder Namasudras and their priests were hesitant and suspicious about the ulterior motives of this missionary, the leader stood firm and himself donated a piece of land on which Mead started his mission in 1906, initially in a tent.⁷⁷ Apart from teaching gospel to the Namasudras with the assistance of Rev. H. Sutton, Mead also began to run a charitable dispensary. The elementary school for boys was raised to the status of a high school, where about 200 lads came to study from different villages across rivers and marshes. A day-school and a Sunday-school for girls were opened under the supervision of Miss Tuck. The Widows' Home at Orakandi, looked after by Nurse Thomson, provided shelter to a number of destitute Namasudra widows, while Miss Kamala Bose, a Christian Bengali young lady, started working for the upliftment of the Namasudra women at Gopalganj, about 20 miles away from Orakandi.⁷⁸ All these activities were made possible by the local support that Mead received from Guruchand and his followers, which gave him a strong base in an area predominantly inhabited by the members of a disgruntled but ambitious untouchable caste. Before his departure from India, Mead, therefore, openly acknowledged :

"In the various activities of my missionary life he [Guruchand] has made possible many things that without his backing could not have been carried through. . ."⁷⁹

Expression of gratitude was, however, reciprocal. As a Namasudra paper put it, "...the Christians [are] lifting the rock from off us, and we are getting a chance to rise, but we do not know how to express the gratitude we so deeply feel."⁸⁰ But

as Mead realised, the Namasudras only learnt to "lift up their heads," but refused to "turn their heads to behold the Lamp of God and then . . . to bow their heads in living and lowly homage at His pierced feet."⁸¹ [*Italics original*]. The Faridpur Mission could convert two Namasudra families before 1911.⁸² And this goes to show, as Rev. Sutton pointed out, the Namasudras "imbibe[d] just so much of the Christian spirit as . . . [would] enable them to forge ahead to a place of independence and respectability."⁸³ But what the missionaries could more or less successfully achieve was to widen the cleavage between the nationalists and this ambitious social group.⁸⁴ Political agitations were as much a problem of the missionaries as it was of the government, for they "widened the gulf between Indians and Europeans, thus setting the missionary in a very difficult position".⁸⁵ Mead, therefore, projected himself as the benefactor of the Namasudras, won their gratitude, tried to ensure their loyalty to the government and on a number of occasions, acted as a liaison between the two.

But such endeavours could actually succeed because institutional incentives were constantly forthcoming from the colonial government. The British, as it seems, were trying through various measures to dilute the mounting intensity of the anti-imperialist agitation during this period, and the best way to do this was to alienate sections of Indian society, as large as possible, from the nationalist movements by encouraging political separatism among the so-called 'backward classes', simultaneously with the Muslims. The constant tendency of compartmentalising and stereotyping the Indian society in terms of primordial categories in the census reports, led to a reinforced caste-consciousness and caste solidarity. As the British thus tried to define the Indian society, the people in the lower rungs of the social structure tried to take advantage of that process in order to improve their position, at least in the imperial corpus of knowledge. The result was that the Indians, particularly those belonging to the lower castes, increasingly began to identify themselves in terms of caste, substituted better names for their old degrading caste appellations and claimed higher position for themselves in the ritual hierarchy. Census, for them, was an opportunity for getting formal recognition of their higher social claims denied by their caste superiors and such recognition, they also believed, would soften the attitude of the local society as well.⁸⁶ It was planned at the time of the census of 1881, that "the castes should be classified by their social position" in the reports. But "the original arrangement was dropped," as the

Census Superintendents were overwhelmed and bewildered by the enormous number of petitions they received, "complaining of the position assigned to castes to which the petitioners belonged."⁸⁷ But in 1901, Herbert Risley, the Census Commissioner, actually tried to classify each caste according to its place in Hindu society, both in terms of local hierarchy and *varna* affiliation.⁸⁸ This gave rise to a considerable agitation amongst the various lower castes, the Namasudras not excepted. Bhishma-dev Das and several other Namasudras sent a representation, praying that their caste should be designated as Namasudra and the old despising name 'Chandal' should be deleted.⁸⁹ The agitation was renewed when the census operations of 1911 were instituted, threatening disturbance of peace at different quarters.

So much consternation was not perhaps merely the result of social aspirations. It would not be an absolutely wild conjecture if we suppose that it was generated also by the more material expectations of institutional benefits, such as caste representation in public employment and elected bodies or reservation of seats in educational institutions. Such expectations were fostered in the late nineteenth century by the government policy of "special protection" for the Muslims, designed to ensure "due distribution of places of emoluments so as to prevent the depression of a numerous and influential class."⁹⁰ Similar preferential treatment was being meted out to the backward castes as well, in other provinces of India. In 1881, the Bombay government, for example, had "laid down the important principle that in distributing public patronage endeavour should be made to secure a due admixture of the various races and castes in the service of Government." Such a policy was formulated, not merely to pay more attention to the special needs of the backward communities, but also to break the monopoly of power enjoyed by the so-called higher castes which supplied the largest number of participants in the nationalist agitations.⁹¹ In Bengal, the very partition of the province in 1905 was designed not merely to elevate the Muslim community from its backwardness, but at the same time to strike at the roots of the power of the high caste Bengali *bhadralok*, the principal troublemakers for the colonial government in the province. Hence the new administration of Eastern Bengal and Assam, through its employment and educational policies and favoured treatment to the Muslims sought to destroy what Richard Cronin has called the "class rule" by the Hindu landowning, money-lending, professional and clerical classes, mainly belonging to the three traditional higher castes, the Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas.⁹²

And such an openly publicised policy of protective discrimination could hardly escape the notice of the ambitious Namasudras, whose hopes and aspirations were now sufficiently inflamed to guide them into the path of political separatism. The nationalist leadership, on the other hand, whether moderate or extremist, could not offer any effective alternative social, economic or political programme for integrating the Namasudras or similar other lower castes with the rest of Hindu society and mobilise them into their political movements. The failure was quite apparent during the anti-partition agitation—the first major political movement since the beginning of the Namasudra protest.

IV. Beginning of the Swadeshi Movement and Namasudra Response

On the 4th of July, 1905, it became publicly known from the Secretary of State's statement in the House of Commons, that the final sanction had been given to the long debated scheme of partitioning Bengal. Four days later the Government Resolution was published in the Calcutta papers. Early in August, Congress in Calcutta called for the boycott of English piece goods and other imported articles and advocated the use of their *swadeshi* substitutes. The movement rapidly gained the sympathy of the educated community all over Bengal. And soon the *zamindars* took it up and through their *naibs* and peons, began to forbid the use of European goods by their *raiyats*.⁹³

But still the main problem before the *swadeshi* leaders was regarding the mobilisation of the masses. And by the end of 1906, the agitation began to lose much of its vitality, not merely because the masses did not respond to the solicitations of the agitators,⁹⁴ but also because they were now resisting the pressures more sturdily than they were able to do at first.⁹⁵ During these early years of the *swadeshi* movement, apart from some occasional attempts to mobilise the Hindu masses, the main attention of the leaders focussed on the problems of mobilising the Muslims,⁹⁶ who were by now more or less convinced that 'the Partition would be a boon to them and that their special difficulties would receive greater attention from the new administration.'⁹⁷ The government at this time, was also primarily preoccupied with the task of ensuring the loyalty of this particular section of the population of Eastern Bengal.⁹⁸ None of them, however, seems to have been sufficiently aware of the fact

that the Namasudras were also thinking on the same line. Sashi Bhusan Thakur, the eldest son of Guruchand, had in the meantime made contacts with Nawab Salimullah of Dacca and together they decided that the Muslims and the Namasudras would not support the movement against partition and jointly they would offer resistance to any move for its annulment.⁹⁹ This political attitude later on became clearly discernible in a number of Namasudra resolutions adopted in course of the year 1906. One such resolution, unanimously adopted towards the end of the year, stated that it was "simply owing to the dislike and hatred of the Brahmins, the Vaidyas and the Kayasthas that this vast Namasudra community has remained backward ; this community has, therefore, not the least sympathy with them and their agitation, and will henceforth work hand in hand with their Mahomedan brethren."¹⁰⁰ In another such resolution passed at a meeting held at Orakandi in Faridpur on October 2, 1906, they expressed their gratitude to the Secretary of State "for his declaring the partition of Bengal as a settled fact and admissible of no amendment."¹⁰¹ The motivation behind such unequivocal support for one of the most criticised policies of the British government can easily be detected from another resolution passed around the same time in a similar meeting which prayed "most earnestly that the Hon'ble Mr. Hare will bestow the same rights and privileges upon the Namasudras as have been done upon the Mahomedans, in as much as the Namasudras and the Mahomedans are the predominating communities of Eastern Bengal. . . ."¹⁰²

In the political behaviour of the Namasudras during the early years of the *swadeshi* movement we can therefore identify two basic features—alignment with the Muslims and loyalty to the British. Material calculations no doubt prompted such a course of action. But apart from this, there were certain other sentiments and influences involved as well. We learn from a poem "Musalman", published in *Pataka* in 1917, that the alliance between the Muslims and the Namasudras was viewed as a union of two outcaste peasant communities equally despised and exploited by the high caste Hindu gentry.¹⁰³ And this served as an adequate justification for their decision of offering a joint resistance to a movement which was led and supported by such high caste Hindu landlords and expressing in no uncertain terms their loyalty to the British government.

The events of 1906, however, made the nationalist leadership aware of the situation and conscious of the fact that unless they could mobilise this large agrarian caste their movement had

little chance of success. And this prompted them to undertake a series of attempts to secure their support, sometimes through persuasion and sometimes through use of force, as "social ostracism" which had become a very handy method of forcing reluctant people to observe *swadeshi* had no effect on an untouchable caste having no social rights whatsoever.

In Faridpur in early 1907 Ambika Charan Mazumdar, the foremost among the *swadeshi* leaders of that district, visited different places in the Madaripur sub-division, one of the principal Namasudra areas and held a number of boycott meetings, which were reported to have been "fairly successful."¹⁰⁴ In continuation of these initial efforts, the draft resolution of the proposed Faridpur District Conference which was scheduled to commence on 13 July 1907, tried to make political use of an old grievance of the Namasudras against their being employed as scavengers in jails. The sixth resolution ran as follows :

"...this conference strongly protests against the degrading treatment to which Namasudras as a class are wrongly subjected in the jails, and which is not only highly repugnant to their feelings, but also acts as a social stigma upon their caste and this conference strongly urges that regular sweepers should be provided for serving the jail population."¹⁰⁵

But the conference itself was prohibited by the Magistrate of Faridpur under section 5 of the Public Meetings Ordinance of 1907, when the promoters refused to delete certain other 'objectionable' parts of the resolution as suggested by the government.¹⁰⁶ On this occasion, however, the Faridpur District Association had come into existence with Ambika Mazumdar as the President.¹⁰⁷ In the second half of September, on the eve of the *pujas*, the Association circulated a printed letter calling upon shopkeepers to refrain from importing foreign goods for the *pujas*.¹⁰⁸ At the same time Mazumdar undertook an extensive "tour through the south of the district, advocating purchase of country goods only for Durga Puja", although to avoid government interference he made no mention of "boycott."¹⁰⁹ The political significance of this particular tour can be assessed properly if we bear in mind the demographic character of southern Faridpur, where most of the local Namasudras lived in the swamp areas.

Apart from such direct method of approach through political meetings, the Faridpur District Association took recourse to

other means which the government described as "a species of bribery" by which it tried to gain "an influence over villages where the swadeshi spirit had not a spontaneous and independent existence."¹¹⁰ As an example the case of the Dhalgram national school may be cited. In the village of Dhalgram, "inhabited almost entirely by Namasudras", a school was run in the house of a well-to-do member of the same caste with 37 pupils coming from the same community. In 1906, the school house being in a dilapidated condition, the Namasudras asked their landlords Chandra Bilash and Kunja Bilash Mukherjee for assistance, which was promised, provided they would take the *swadeshi* vow. Having no other resort the villagers agreed to oblige, and the school was saved. Later, when the Faridpur District Association was trying to gain control over primary education in the district, the school received a monthly grant of Rs. 2/-, on condition that the students would continue to take the vow.¹¹¹

In Bakarganj, Aswini Kumar Dutta and his *Swadesh Bhandhab Samiti* were making similar efforts to enlist the support of the Namasudras in the agitation. Village *samitis* were formed to mobilise the villagers and teach them the principles of self-help and self-government. For this purpose, arbitration *samitis* were started which decided their cases and suits and curtailed their legal expenses. One such *samiti* is said to have operated successfully during the second year of the *swadeshi* movement in village Tarachar inhabited by the Namasudras who were thus saved from "the dreadful jaws of litigation." The villagers are said to have given up registering their documents and instead began to execute documents by putting thumb impressions in the presence of five *mandals* of the village. And if anybody denied the execution of the document, he was subjected to social discipline and punished.¹¹²

Apart from this, in the following year the *Swadesh Bhandhab Samiti* through its rural branches "made the most sustained and vigorous effort to enmesh the Muhammadan peasantry and the Namasudras in its net." They were induced to attend meetings and were promised social and other favours if they participated in the *swadeshi* movement. For this purpose, leaders like Aswini Dutta, Satish Chandra Chatterjee and other volunteers like Nishi Kanta Bose and Srish Chandra Ray, went round the interior of the district, delivering speeches which the government considered as of "the most objectionable character."¹¹³ The most important of such tours was perhaps the one undertaken by Aswini Dutta himself in Sarupkati and Jhalakati

police stations in the rains of 1907, around the middle of June. He visited places like Masiani, Garangal, Kaukhali, Juluhar and Nazirpur, addressed largely attended meetings, had close talks with the Muslim and Namasudra peasants, persuaded them to use *swadeshi* goods and boycott English courts.¹¹⁴ Simultaneously with this, rumours were systematically spread in these areas that the oppressive "Assam laws" were going to be introduced soon, that the government would take over all lands, new taxes would be imposed on coconut and date trees,¹¹⁵ as well as on betel nut and plantain trees. Hindu widows would be forced to remarry and above all, people in large numbers would be packed off to Assam to serve as tea garden coolies.¹¹⁶ Political demonstrations, also continued in the predominantly Namasudra areas such as the Gournadi *thana*.¹¹⁷ Along with this, pamphlets were also published, such as *Swadeshi Sangeet*, which stated that "the English mix the fat of the cow and the pig with salt" and "the bone of the cow" with sugar.¹¹⁸

In the district of Dacca, however, the poor Namasudras were subjected to intimidation and coercion when found buying foreign goods during the *puja* holidays.¹¹⁹ A particularly flagrant instance of this occurred at Sholla, where in late October 1907, a party of young men visited the quarter inhabited by the Namasudras in a boat and conducted a series of door to door search with a view to seeing that no foreign goods were used. In one instance they are said to have tried to strip a woman of the cloth she was wearing on the ground that it was foreign and generally their proceedings were so violent that three distinct prosecutions were initiated by the persons manhandled. But it is reported, that as the accused were chiefly young men of good birth and influence, the complainants were induced to withdraw most of their charges. The government feared that the prosecution might prove pointless except perhaps in the case of some of the minor offenders.¹²⁰ And this was precisely what was to happen. In spite of the efforts of the government, only two persons could be sentenced to four months' imprisonment and the attempts to enforce the boycott by coercive means went on unabated.¹²¹ In fact, such coercion had become a common practice in a wide area of Eastern Bengal, particularly in districts like Bakarganj, Faridpur and Mymensingh where Hindu *zamindars* were strictly prohibiting the sale and use of foreign piece goods in their respective *zamindaries* "on pain of heavy fine or sound shoe-beating."¹²²

The Namasudra leaders like Guruchand, his son Sashi Bhushan and their associates were also active in counteracting

such nationalist attempts. They assiduously tried to dissuade their caste people from joining the boycott movement on the ground that *swadeshi* was the slogan of the rich educated *zamindars* who had always in the past ignored the interests of the poor Namasudras. It was a movement of rich people for furthering their own self-interest and the poor peasants had no interests involved in it. The Partition would not affect the Namasudras, while its withdrawal would not bring any special benefit to them. On the contrary, the Namasudras might profit from the loyalty to the foreign rulers who believed in social equality. So the movement was entirely in the interest of the rich, while they wanted to put its burden on the shoulders of the poor Namasudras who purchased foreign goods only because of their cheapness. Those nationalist leaders, as Guruchand emphasized, who were now trying to secure their support for the *swadeshi* movement, had not uttered a single word in the past against *zamindari* oppression or against the inhuman treatment meted out towards them by the Brahmins and the Kayasthas. For a long time, the Namasudras had been the outcasts of the society. So only when they were given a place of honour, would they come forward with full vigour to serve the country. Hence, if the nationalists really wanted the Namasudras to support their political movement, they should first wage a battle to obliterate social inequalities, which they were not prepared to do.¹²³

The identification of the *swadeshi* movement with the high caste Hindu *zamindars*, whom the Namasudra peasants thoroughly hated, was quite natural. Many of the leaders had *zamindari*es in areas where Namasudras mainly served as tenants. Ambika Mazumdar had a *zamindari* in the swamp areas of Rajair in the Madaripur *thana* of Faridpur district,¹²⁴ while Aswini Dutta's estate was in Batajore in Bakarganj, where Namasudras mainly served as *barga* tenants.¹²⁵ Apart from these top leaders, if we look at the composition of the National Volunteers during this time, we will find that almost all of them were either doctors or pleaders or else, sons of Hindu *zamindars* and their peons and *lathials*. In Namasudra majority areas, like Sarupkati, "nearly half the volunteers are said to be talukdars."¹²⁶ Almost all the *samitis* and associations run in such areas of north and west Bakarganj were patronised by high caste Hindu *bhadralok*, the majority of whom were either *zamindars*, *talukdars*, or *howladars*.¹²⁷ The Dacca *Anusilan Samiti* had a similar high caste Hindu *bhadralok* orientation, although later on a few low caste persons were also inducted.¹²⁸ In Bakarganj, it is often alleged that the leaders of the *Swadesh*

Bandhab Samiti, like Aswini Dutta, Upendra Nath Sen and others were "specially active in using their powers as landlord" to organise boycott and discontent.¹²⁹ Similar allegations, as we have seen earlier, were common in other districts as well, particularly in Dacca, Faridpur and Mymensingh.

Thus, in the Namasudra psyche the anti-partition agitation came to be increasingly associated with the high caste Hindu gentry with whom they had no identity of interest. The Government, on the other hand, was granting concessions in which the aspirations of a socially ambitious untouchable caste found possibilities of fulfilment. The announcement of the government that its employees would be henceforth recruited on the basis of the proportional numerical strength of the various communities raised new hopes in the minds of the educated Namasudras about further social and material advancement. Such admittance to the public service was regarded by them as "their first chance of rising in public estimation."¹³⁰

To take fullest advantage of such provisions, the educated Namasudras in 1907, under the advice of Mead, decided to organise a delegation to Sir Lancelot Hare, the then Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Mead fixed up the appointment and the delegation, headed by Guruchand himself, included five of his close associates, Bhishmadev Das, Sashi Bhushan Thakur, Dr. Tarini Charan Bala, Radhamohan Biswas and Purna Chandra Mallik. From the October 1907 issue of their journal *Namasudra Suhrid* we learn that the delegation had met the Lieutenant Governor and prayed that the British government in India might remain forever. They made him aware of the social injustices perpetrated on them, the development of education within their hitherto ignorant community and the necessity of appointing them in increasing numbers in public services in order to help them end the social stigma attached to their caste for centuries.¹³¹ Interestingly, immediately after this meeting Sashi Bhushan was appointed a Sub-Registrar, Dr. Tarini Charan Bala, a government doctor and sometimes later in early 1908, Kumud Behari Mallik, a Deputy Magistrate.¹³² And all these appointments were regarded by the Namasudras as symbols of recognition of their caste by the ruling authorities—a recognition totally absent in the pre-British days and which, they believed, would ensure better treatment from local Hindu society as well.¹³³

In the field of education also, the Namasudras were being assisted by the government whenever approached. Orakandi High School was established in 1908 and was initially maintained

by subscriptions collected from the members of the Namasudra community. But Mead appealed to the Director of Public Instructions for funds and the application being recommended by the Commissioner of Faridpur himself, the school immediately received a monthly grant of Rs. 75/-.¹³⁴ The establishment of this school really marked the beginning of greater diffusion of education among the ignorant Namasudra masses and the financial assistance it received made them more strongly attached to the missionaries and their patron, the British government. The nationalists could not offer any concrete programme for the upliftment of the social and economic status of the Namasudras to counteract such moves.

The endeavours of the Namasudra leadership, supported adequately by the government, therefore led to the expected political results. In Faridpur, the political speeches of Ambika Mazumdar advocating the use of *Swadeshi* goods seem to have had little effect on the Namasudra peasantry¹³⁵ and the Dhalgram National School was soon "reported to be defunct."¹³⁶ In Bakarganj, the peasants in general, both lower caste Hindus and Muslims, had become indifferent and regarded the anti-government agitation merely as "something that the Babus are doing".¹³⁷ In areas with major Namasudra concentration, like Pirojpur, Liverpool salt was being freely sold.¹³⁸ And where they faced obstruction, such as in Goila in Gaurnadi *thana*, the Namasudra peasants "decided to set up a *hat* of their own as they cannot get British goods as freely as they wished."¹³⁹ Such anti-*swadeshi* sentiments had taken over their counterparts in the neighbouring districts of Jessore and Khulna as well. In April 1908, two meetings consisting of 700 to 800 Muslims and Namasudras were held in Jessore in order to counteract the efforts of the *swadeshis* and a notice was circulated threatening to burn the houses of those who would not use foreign articles.¹⁴⁰ In these areas however, the anti-*swadeshi* zeal had also taken the shape of a militant social protest. At a meeting of about 1000 Namasudras held at Narail in September, 1907, it was decided that they should not serve the higher classes of Hindus.¹⁴¹ In Khulna, in village Tilak, around May 1908 the Namasudras combined with the Muslims against the Brahmins and the Kayasthas in a quarrel over the performance of a religious ceremony and armed with sticks, spears and shields, attacked a police party that came to the rescue of the latter.¹⁴²

The nationalists seem to have been aware of the developments and sufficiently conscious about the necessity of doing something. And therefore to salvage the situation, in 1908

they made renewed attempts to mobilise this community and the eighteenth resolution of the Bengal Provincial Conference, held at Pabna in February, spoke of giving "social privileges to the Namasudras, such as use of barbours, washermen and bearers."¹⁴³ In continuation of this initial gesture, two meetings were held in the district of Faridpur on 1 and 2 March. The first meeting was attended by three to four thousand people, including Muslims and Namasudras, as well as other Hindus. The first speaker, G. G. Pattadar, a pleader from Rajbari, alleged that the partition would be followed by the abolition of the Permanent Settlement and the people would have to pay heavier taxes. To prevent this was needed a united resistance by all the sections of Indian society. And to achieve such social unity he asked the Hindus present there to allow social privileges to the Namasudras who had been reluctant to join the agitation of their high caste brethren out of a sense of social deprivation. Ambika Mazumdar, the next speaker, also explained to the Muslims and the Namasudras the advantages of using *swadeshi* goods and promised the latter that he would have their status raised if they gave up the use of foreign articles. In the second meeting as well he made similar appeals,¹⁴⁴ which "are reported, however, to have had little effect on the people more particularly addressed."¹⁴⁵

Similarly in Bakarganj, the *Swadesh Bandhab Samiti* through its 159 village branches had been constantly trying to bring the Namasudra peasants into its organisation.¹⁴⁶ This particular problem received special attention during the deliberations at the Barisal District Conference held on the 17th, the 18th and the 19th August, 1908. On the second day, Sricharan Sen moved the fifteenth resolution which ran as follows :

"This conference considers it necessary to spread education among the Namasudras whereby to improve their social condition."¹⁴⁷

In moving the resolution, the speaker said that there would be no success in the political arena unless the condition of the Namasudras be improved. The government dismissed the agitation as nothing more than the effort of a few educated men who wished to attain power in the political field. To avoid such stigma as well as to make the movement more effective, the support of the lower classes had to be secured. For, it was quite impossible to agitate, as Sen argued, without the Namasudras who constituted the only fighting class of people among the Hindus of

Bengal. There were twentythree lakhs of them in the district of Bakarganj alone and the Christian missionaries were always after them. In order to neutralize such pernicious influences the Namasudras had to be given some social privileges. They desired to have their clothes washed by the Hindu washermen and Sen could see no reason to deny this. For if the people could claim *Swaraj* to have equal rights and privileges with the Englishmen, why then should the Namasudras not claim this concession? Hence to obtain *swaraj*, he urged the higher classes of people to make some concessions to the lower classes as well. The resolution was seconded by Purna Chandra De, who went so far as to compare the *samurai* disturbances in Japan with those of the common classes in India, when he was stopped by the president, Aswini Kumar Dutta. Baikantha Nath Mal, one of the few educated Namasudras who attended the conference, also supported the resolution. He explained the present state of his community and said that the *dhobis* had no reason to refuse their services to the Namasudras who also belonged very much to the Hindu society. In addition to this he also pleaded for the assistance of the higher castes for the spread of education among the members of his caste. Two other Namasudras, Mohini Mohan Das of Chandshi and Aswini Kumar Haldar of Garangal also supported the resolution which was carried without any opposition.¹⁴⁸

The third day of the meeting was entirely devoted to the question of "improvement and reformation of society." But as it appears from the different speeches delivered on this day, of all social problems the one which monopolised the attention of almost all the speakers was the degraded condition of the Namasudras. Surendra Nath Sen of Gaurnadi expressed his views in favour of abolishing the caste system altogether ; so long as this was not done, as he argued, political success would continue to elude, for it needed brotherly feelings between all classes. Satish Chandra Chatterjee, one of the closest associates of Aswini Dutta, spoke at length about the low social position of the Namasudras and frankly admitted that many of them were anti-*swadeshi* simply because they were despised by all the sections of Hindu society. Hence in order to secure their political support they had to be given certain social privileges. Initially, as his simple solution was, the barbers had to be persuaded to shave the Namasudras. Sricharan Sen added to this a proposal of securing the services of the washermen and some of the *zamindars* present in the meeting, like Upendra Nath Sen Mahalanabis of Basanda. Bhubaneswar Roy Chowdhury of

Kalaskathi and Sarada Kumar Roy Chowdhury of Rahematpur promised to see that the barbers and washermen serve the Namasudras in their respective *zamindaries*.¹⁴⁰

It is important to note here, that the list of people who attended the Barisal District Conference on 17-19 August 1908 shows that an overwhelming majority of them belonged to the three Hindu upper castes¹⁵⁰; but none of them uttered a single word about accepting food and water from the hands of the Namasudras—a social demand articulated by the latter since the early 1870's. Instead they found a handy scapegoat and satisfied their conscience by shifting the responsibility on to the shoulders of the barbers and washermen. Apart from a few hollow promises, neither in the speeches of Ambika Mazumdar nor in those delivered at the Barisal District Conference, was there any concrete programme for the social and economic advancement of the Namasudra peasants. Such a lack of serious intention was clearly discernible also in a speech delivered at a Namasudra conference in the middle of 1908 by Pyary Sankar Dasgupta, an extremist leader of Bogra. He advised the Namasudras not to quarrel with the higher castes, for such feeling of animosity would make it more difficult for them to attain a higher social status. They should eschew their sectarianism and unite with the rest of the society under the banner of the Indian nation. But what would they receive in return and how they would improve their material condition and social position? His answer to this difficult question was rather simple: "Help yourself and God will help you."¹⁵¹

V. Commutation Proceedings—Further Alienation

In fact the Namasudras were helping themselves in the way they considered best suited to their interests. A Namasudra Conference in March 1908 demanded "freedom of trade" and by the summer of that year they were reported to be buying foreign cloth and salt in Barisal, in spite of the fact that sometimes these were even costlier than their *swadeshi* equivalents.¹⁵² Such active resistance to the *swadeshi* movement was perhaps to some extent also due to the commutation proceedings under Section 40 of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, which further exacerbated the tensions between the high caste Hindu landlords and their Namasudra tenants.

Produce rent was an exceptional feature of the land-tenure system of Bakarganj. Apart from a few isolated areas in *thana*:

Mehendiganj and round Banaripara, it could only be found extensively in the marshy regions of Gaurnadi police station where large colonies of high caste Hindu *bhadralok* had settled and the Namasudra agriculturists served as tenants. It was undoubtedly the most miserable part of Bakarganj, supplying the bulk of the day-labourers of the district, while in the harvesting seasons the farm-hands of the richer southern *thanas* were entirely recruited here.¹⁵³ But even in these areas produce rent seems to have been a rather modern development and in all probability was perhaps the result of the increase in the price of rice since 1870. Some of the petty landlords found it difficult to feed their families and turned to their tenants for the supply of rice, while some of them, not satisfied with supplying their own wants, set up a highly profitable trade in rice. Where vacant land was available it was leased on a produce rent. But in many cases existing low cash rents were converted arbitrarily into produce rents, particularly when the tenants were found in arrears or owed money to their landlords.¹⁵⁴ And due to the unpredictability of nature, tenants were often caught in a vulnerable position. In Gaurnadi *thana*, once or twice in a decade there a dreadful year would occur in which the floods would wipe out all the crops and render the Namasudra tenants almost penniless.¹⁵⁵ The landlords would only have to wait for one such year to compel them to accept *barga* tenancy. Under this system, the landlord's share was usually fixed at a half, but sometimes at a third of the total crop, and it was collected from the threshing floor itself. But soon the landlords found fault with this system, because of the difficulties in measuring the crop and the fluctuations in the amount with the varying seasons. They devised a new system, the *dhankarari*, "in which the rent was fixed at a definite amount of produce (so many *maunds* of paddy) and by which measurement and fluctuations were equally avoided."¹⁵⁶ Ordinarily under this system none of the expenses of cultivation were borne by the landlord, so that both the burden and the hazard of cultivation were taken by the tenant himself.¹⁵⁷ The *karari* rent usually represented little less than one half of the average crop and sometimes considerably more, leaving the tenant with the surplus paddy of the fat years when it sold at low prices and taking from him almost everything in the lean years when prices were prohibitive. In these areas the average cash rates were low, varying between Rs. 3 and Rs. 4 an acre, while on the other hand, the valuation of *karari* rents would ordinarily be between Rs. 12 and Rs. 16 per acre, but occasionally much higher. Naturally, therefore, during the last few decades of the nineteenth

century and the first of the twentieth, a considerable amount of land previously held at cash rates were speedily converted, on one pretext or another and by one means or another, into lands of produce-paying tenancies. And where *barga* system initially came into existence, it was soon converted into *karari* tenancy.¹⁵⁸

The *barga* system, it is true, was liable to abuse and was often used as an instrument of oppression. However, the cultivators, it seems, had accepted it without much hesitation as after the cyclone of 1876 money had become scarce and dear and communications with the grain-markets insecure.¹⁵⁹ But the *dhankarari* tenancies to them were simply detestable. And therefore, when the settlement operations started in Bakarganj a large number of Namasudra tenants, led sometimes by Christian converts, organised themselves in Gaurnadi and made verbal applications for commutation of their produce rents into cash rents. By section 40 of the Tenancy Act of 1885, commutation could be made on the application of an occupancy *raiyat* by an officer making a settlement of rents under Chapter X. The landlords objected strongly to any such commutation and when the Settlement Officer, Mr. Beatson-Bell, in a tour of inspection made it clear to them that commutation was a legal right of an occupancy *raiyat*, some of the Gaurnadi landlords began to sue their tenants, whose rents had been commuted, for three years' arrears of produce rents. This particular course was adopted by them merely to frighten the tenants, who had not as yet applied, from making any application and to compel those whose rents had been commuted to continue paying in kind as before.¹⁶⁰ Previous to 1904 there had never been a single suit for arrears of produce rents in the civil courts. In 1904 came the settlement operations with commutation bitterly resented by the landlords, and in 1905 there were 209 suits for arrears of paddy rents accruing in 1901-02 and 1903. Out of these 209 cases, many contested, the landlords got decrees in 206 and this led them to boast openly in Gaurnadi, that they would bring their tenants to their knees by rent suits.¹⁶¹

But history was destined to be different. When the settlement of the district reached what is technically known as the 'attestation' stage, the practice of commuting produce to money rents was introduced. Subsequently, however, it was held to be illegal, as section 40 of the Bengal Tenancy Act in the form in which it then stood, gave no authority to the Settlement Officers or their assistants to commute rents at the attestation stage. To rectify this illegality, one of the Assistant Settlement Officers, Radha Krishna Goswami, was "specially empowered" by the:

local government to deal with the applications for commutation and to proceed with them *de novo*. Nearly all these applications were granted and the money rent fixed was much below the value of the produce which hitherto fell to the landlord's share.¹⁶² This light money rent fixed by the new officer encouraged the other Namasudra cultivators of the marshy areas to form a combination and apply for further commutation. In order to induce others to join them, they circulated the story that it was in fact the government which was pressing for such commutation and in some cases they went so far as to coerce, by social boycott, those who hesitated to apply. The result was the opening of the flood-gates. Goswami had started his work in April 1908 and the number of applications received upto August was 1,305. Of them, 1,160 were disposed of and in all cases except about 30, commutation was allowed.¹⁶³

The implications of such a development were not happy for the landlords. It meant a sudden reduction of the rent roll and the landlords did not accept it in good grace. As a first step, they filed a large number of appeals and, in those cases in which the time for appeal had expired, petitions for revision.¹⁶⁴ They also sent memorials to the Board of Revenue saying that "these proceedings are conducted to the special advantage of the tenants" and describing the findings of the Assistant Settlement Officer as "in almost all cases most arbitrary."¹⁶⁵ But as a last resort, as H. Savage, the first member of the Board of Revenue noted in August 1908, "the landlords intend either to harass their tenants by suits for the produce rents now in arrears and so bring them to their knees, or failing this to resort to the *lathi*, *dao* and similar weapons in the use of which the inhabitants of Bakraganj are past masters."¹⁶⁶ But even then the tenants refused to be intimidated. When in early 1910, Atul Chandra Guha, the Deputy Collector, was asked to enquire and report on the disputed cases, in only 7 out of a total of 187 cases did the tenants fail to appear at the time of the enquiry.¹⁶⁷

Thus the commutation proceedings brought to the surface the long accumulated hatred between the high caste Hindu landlords and their suffering Namasudra tenants, the government projecting itself as the benefactor of the latter. Many of the landlords involved in such proceedings were men of very good circumstances, having a large trade in rice and sometimes closely associated with the *swadeshi* movement. Most notable among them were the Duttas of Batajore (to this family belonged Aswini Dutta), the Dasses of Goila, the Sarbajnas of Bakal and the Guptas of Chandshi.¹⁶⁸ On the other hand, the commuta-

tion proceedings affected only about 7 per cent of the total area paying rent in kind in the whole district and the cases were only numerous in the marshy regions of Gaurnadi and Mehendiganj *thanas* where mostly Namasudras served as tenants at produce rent.¹⁶⁹ The fact indicates the effectiveness of the Namasudra caste loyalty for organising peasant resistance against a long perpetrated oppressive device of the all-powerful high caste Hindu landlords. The government also efficiently played the role of a dependable patron of the tenants and thus successfully fanned the feeling of hatred existing between the two classes. This attitude of the government is amply revealed in the following extract from a letter of J. C. Jack written to the Commissioner of the Dacca Division when the commutation proceedings were proposed to be discontinued :

“ . . . I might also add that the *bil* tenants [Namasudras] have been a thing apart for years. They were originally driven to the *bils* [marshes] by the oppression of the higher castes ; and previous to permanent settlement these colonies owned nobody as landlords. It was we who handed them over for nothing by the permanent settlement to these very higher castes from whose oppression they had sought shelter in the *bils*. These same higher castes had reaped always where the Namas only sowed. Now it is proposed apparently to throw them once again to feed the rapacity of the wolves.”¹⁷⁰

It is, therefore, no wonder that in 1908, the Namasudra peasants in Bakarganj had become the strongest supporters of the British Raj and offered an active resistance to the *swadeshi* movement, which in their consciousness had come to be associated with the high caste Hindu gentry, their hated oppressors.

Such agrarian tension was not a local phenomenon of Bakarganj alone. In the *bil* areas of Faridpur cash rents at the prevailing rate were being converted wholesale into *barga* with a rent of half the crop.¹⁷¹ Of course, it is true that in the marshes, where the amount of land capable of cultivation varied each year, the *barga* system had its advantages and probably suited the tenants as well.¹⁷² But in Kotalipara and Gopalganj, where the Namasudras mainly resided, *dhankarari* tenures were rapidly proliferating and under this system the tenants had to pay a much higher rent than the prevailing low cash rates.¹⁷³ Petty frictions were, therefore, not infrequent, as the cultivators often attempted, although unsuccessfully, to get a cash rent sub-

stituted for a produce rent.¹⁷⁴ Disturbances between the Namasudras and their landlords were also regular occurrences. In January 1909, a case of looting in a *bazar* was reported from Gopinathpur in the Madaripur sub-division¹⁷⁵; and it was only a reported incident, probably among many other unreported ones, that were caused by the "considerable trouble . . . between the Namasudras and their landlords" occurring at that time throughout the entire sub-division.¹⁷⁶ The special officer who was deputed to make a local enquiry, found it to be just an attempt of the Namasudras to entangle their landlords into some trouble and thereby to bring their own grievances to the notice of the government authorities.¹⁷⁷ This excitement persisted till the end of the year and spread to the neighbouring regions as well. In late September, a case of house-breaking was reported from village Ghritakandi in Muksudpur *thana* of Sadar sub-division.¹⁷⁸ When the police arrived and conducted searches in connection with the burglary, they were violently assaulted by the local Namasudras. The sub-inspector had to open fire in self-defence when one of his boatmen was seriously injured and a constable was struck down with a *dao*.¹⁷⁹ Such turbulence and lawlessness, as it was reported, were almost general features of the way of life of Namasudras of Muksudpur during this time.¹⁸⁰

This atmosphere of tension and violence widened the gulf between the Namasudra peasantry and their high caste landlords in Faridpur district and further stiffened the hostile attitude of the former towards the *swadeshi* movement, backed by the latter. In April 1909, the Namasudras of Faridpur held a meeting at Machkhali at which they resolved to boycott the higher classes who denied them social privileges.¹⁸¹ Before that, on the 27th February, an important meeting of the Muslims and the Namasudras had already taken place in village Maldia. Its object was to form a combination against the boycott movement. The meeting expressed its sympathy with the Namasudras of the locality, who were said to have been "inhumanly oppressed by the *swadeshi* volunteers."¹⁸²

The agitation of the Namasudras for their social and educational advancement and the general tension prevailing among them in the districts of Bakarganj and Faridpur, led to a fresh series of political meetings by the nationalists. In Bakarganj, one such meeting was held in October 1909, under the presidency of Rajani Kanta Das, a pleader of Barisal, where Upendra Nath Sen, a well-known local leader promised a free site for a boarding house for the Namasudra students, and two others promised to canvas for subscriptions throughout the villages.¹⁸³

During the latter part of the month, Ambika Mazumdar made a tour in eastern Faridpur with a view to engaging the sympathy of the Namasudras to the boycott movement in return for the promise of acknowledgement as members of Hindu society. Exaggerated accounts of the success of this tour appeared in the Calcutta newspapers, but the reports of the local government officers indicate that "the number of Namasudras who attended the meeting, or took the '*swadeshi* vow' was in reality small."¹⁸⁴

The government, however, took a serious notice of this new development, because it showed that "the importance of the so-called 'depressed classes' and the fact that they have hitherto been unaffected by the agitation....[were now being] recognised and appreciated by its leaders."¹⁸⁵ This realisation had prompted the leaders to invite Namasudras and other persons of low caste to *swadeshi* meetings where complementary things were said about them and they were promised social privileges if they agreed to take the *swadeshi* vow. The government regarded this movement "as extremely dangerous since it appeals powerfully to the most ignorant sections of the people...."¹⁸⁶

There was, however, very little chance of these people being won over by the nationalists, for the promises they made were not always adequately backed up by them. The higher castes were too afraid of the consequences of granting the Namasudras the privileges they asked for.¹⁸⁷ In early November, Ambika Majumdar went to Kotalipara *thana* in the Madaripur sub-division and held meetings at Paschimpur and Pinjuri villages. A considerable number of the local Namasudras appear to have attended the meetings and showed interest in the promises put forward by the speaker, on behalf of his brother Bengalis, that the higher castes would help the Namasudras in bettering their social position, if they, in their turn, would assist the higher castes in the *swadeshi* and boycott movement.¹⁸⁸ But the initial signs of enthusiasm rapidly subsided when the Namasudras found, soon after the meetings, that the reality of social relations had hardly changed. As the Sub-Divisional Officer of Gopalganj reports, even the liberal minded high caste *bhadralok* was afraid to grant any privilege whatever for fear of offending the more orthodox sections and thereby creating internal social dissensions. So within a month, the question ceased to be actively discussed in the locality and appears to have been dropped altogether.¹⁸⁹

In the meanwhile, tension was mounting in other neighbouring districts as well. In 1909, the Namasudras and the Muslims of the Narail sub-division of Jessore made common cause to protest against the low opinion in which they were held by the higher

caste Hindus. With this object they combined for some months and decided not to work as menial servants in the houses of the latter, or eat food cooked by them. In some parts of the Magura sub-division also, the Namasudras refused to serve in the houses of the higher caste Hindus or cultivate their lands.¹⁹⁰ In Mymensingh, around September of the same year, the Namasudras of Katiadi, who used to serve as *palki*-bearers, refused to continue their work and in consequence were threatened by the leading Hindus of the locality.¹⁹¹ In January next year, they held meetings, in different parts of the Tangail sub-division at which they resolved not to serve the Kayasthas in any way, and the latter in return decided not to let land nor lend money to the Namasudras.¹⁹² Such tension between the two communities continued at least upto the beginning of 1911.¹⁹³

This growing dissatisfaction among the lower caste people in different parts of eastern Bengal prompted the nationalist leaders to organise, in March, 1910, three conferences at Patuakhali, Pangsa and Tangail in the districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur and Mymensingh respectively. The meetings were planned partially with the purpose of improving the status of the 'depressed classes', but the government suspected political motives of fostering boycott agitation among the lower classes who had so long remained aloof from it. On no ground was it prepared to allow this and all the three conferences were prohibited under the Seditious Meetings Act. The order of prohibition, however, brought "a sense of relief" to many people in all the three districts;¹⁹⁴ perhaps, they were not yet fully convinced about the desirability of granting any concession to the 'depressed classes' which might disturb the existing social equilibrium. The government, it therefore seems, had in fact overreacted, as there was very little reason to be so apprehensive about the possible results of the meetings.

VI. Census of 1911 and Political Separatism

With the onset of the census operations, the whole Namasudra movement and the nationalist response to it began to take a new turn. Since the meeting with the Lieutenant Governor in 1907, campaign was being organised by the Namasudras for securing social acceptance of their new, more pleasing, caste name in place of Chandal, the old despised one. The campaign was locally organised by Shyamlal Biswas of Jessore, Ramkinkar Ray, Dr. Dinabandhu Badoi, Dr. Kalicharan Mandal of Dacca, Bhisma-

dev Das, Purna Chandra Mallik and Dr. Tarini Charan Bala of Faridpur, under the overall leadership of Guruchand Thakur.¹⁹⁵ When society refused to respond favourably, they turned to the Census Commissioner. They were entered in the census tables of 1891 as "Namasudra or Chandal" and in those of 1901 as "Namasudra (Chandal)". But now on the eve of the Census of 1911, Dr. Mead suggested to Guruchand that scores of applications should be sent to the census authorities for the rectification of the returns. Hence messages were sent from Orakandi to different centres from where local leaders sent their separate applications to the Census Commissioner, E. A. Gait, then residing in Punjab, to the effect that they should be returned in the census reports not as 'Chandal', but as 'Namasudra'. The application which was sent from Orakandi was recommended by Mead himself.¹⁹⁶ The local government officials, also seem to have supported them on this particular issue.¹⁹⁷ The result was that, in the report of 1911, they were entered as just 'Namasudra'; the hated appellation 'Chandal' was completely omitted.

The census agitation sometimes involved hostilities between the higher and the lower castes ; but what concerned the nationalist leadership was not this social tension, but the political implications of such a movement. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, by conceding the demand of the Muslim community for separate representation, had stimulated similar aspirations for separate electorates in the minds of many other social groups. The Namasudras were among them. And the apprehension does not seem to be without adequate ground in view of the following petition which the government received from the Namasudra community at about this time :

"We beg to add that, though our religious rites and their observances and social customs are similar to those of high caste Brahmins, *we have not the slightest connection with any of the Hindu communities.* We are not allowed to join them in their social and religious ceremonies. They have been continually looking down upon us with contempt and malice ; have kept us under subjection and total ignorance. We have been smarting under their yoke of bondage. It is absolutely absurd to anticipate that they would, in future, mix with us in social and religious performances. *Thus we desire to be recognised by the Government as entirely a different community having separate claim to political privileges like Muhammadans*".¹⁹⁸

Such manifest and unmistakable signs of political separatism were probably also due to a notorious circular of E. A. Gait, the Census Commissioner, that the 'depressed classes' would be enumerated separately in the coming census. It at once became the target of attack by the nationalists who saw in it other political motives as well. There was a general impression prevalent among the Hindu politicians and the press that "Hindus as a class were not receiving at the hands of the Government the amount of justice and fair play which their numbers, education and importance deserve....". There were even proposals for the establishment of an All India Hindu League for the protection of Hindu interests. The Namasudra movement in this context became vitally important to them as they desired "to use Namasudra agency to turn the balance against Muhammadans in East Bengal in case of necessity".¹⁹⁹ In Gait's Circular, therefore, the nationalists saw a clear political motive, allegedly prompted by the Muslim League, to reduce the numerical superiority of the Hindus by the non-recognition in the approaching census of certain untouchable castes as members of Hindu society. The circular met with a strong opposition from all sections of the Hindu press, and the interference of both the retiring and the incoming Viceroy was sought in the matter.²⁰⁰

Simultaneously with such attacks on the controversial circular, the nationalists also attempted to win influence among these untouchable castes and tried to eliminate their suspicions and thoughts of political separatism. The nationalist press expressed a good deal of sympathy with them in view of the many social disabilities under which they laboured and the agitations started by the Namasudras, the Bhui Malis and others for the removal of these disabilities received considerable support. The extremist paper, *Praja Sakti* declared: "We are on the eve of a social revolution....Talk of caste distinctions when India is a free country, and not now. Irresistible as the ocean tide the Sudras come on. They appeal to the greatest force of our times....the conscience of the civilised man." The *Barisal Hitaishi*, another extremist paper, observed: "All those who have eyes to see must have noticed how a grave wave of dissolution has touched the conservative Hindu Society, willy-nilly, consciously or unconsciously, all people are being drawn into the vortex of this agitation,....God alone is to be the leader of this impending social revolution". The *Charu Mihir* advocated social reform from a belief that unless some reforms were effected in Hindu society the Hindus could not hope to secure political rights, and would deprive their society of the means of their own con-

servation. "Government officials do not attach much importance to their agitation", it remarked, "because of their indifference to the distress that prevails among the depressed classes".²⁰¹ To win over the political support of these depressed sections of the society, the nationalists along with such press propaganda also organised meetings at different places. One such meeting took place on December 13th, 1910, among the Namasudras in Nadia. It was held in the house of Sashi Bhushan Thakur, son of Guruchand, at village Kamalpur in Kumarkhali *thana*. Five or six hundred people assembled and resolutions were passed that the inferior caste of Namasudras should also enjoy the same privileges as other sections of Hindu society. The meeting was presided over by Sarada Charan Mitra, an ex-Judge of High Court, who was at that time organising a pan-Hindu movement in order to counteract the activities of the Muslim League.²⁰²

Early next year, Gait's circular was withdrawn through a press communiqué which stated that there would be no departure from the established practice regarding the enumeration of castes.²⁰³ For the nationalists the immediate cause of anxiety was removed but a concern for the future remained. Fortunately however, soon they found an opportunity which they tried, in all earnestness, to utilise in order to win over the Namasudras, who had been the most articulate group among the 'depressed classes' in pressing their separatist political demands. At this particular point of time, the working alliance between the Muslims and the Namasudras nearly broke down due to the outbreak of a series of riots between the two communities at different places of Bengal. The first of these took place in May, 1911, in the districts of Jessore and Khulna where large scale disturbances broke out over fifty miles of territory. This region was notorious for land disputes leading to violent riots,²⁰⁴ and the immediate occasion of the present one was also a dispute over the possession of a piece of land. The influential individuals of both the communities became closely involved in this agrarian dispute and actually organised the attacking parties. In Jessore, the pucca house of the leader of the Namasudra community, Umesh Chandra Sardar, was partially burned and two respected Muslims, who 'rode about in ponies directing the operations', were arrested in this connection.²⁰⁵ Other similar incidents, although of lesser magnitude, were reported in other regions as well. In June, at Jaynagar Hat in Faridpur district, an altercation over the damage done by some cows trespassing in a field, was about to cause a serious riot between the Muslims and the Namasudras, as the two parties assembled to the number of 400 on each side and prepared to

attack each other. Blood-shed was, however, avoided as wiser counsel prevailed among them when a police party arrived.²⁰⁶ During the same month, the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet reported a riot between the two communities at Chaudhuri Bazar. A Muslim mob, numbering over a thousand and armed with spears and *lathis*, attacked the Namasudras and damaged their houses. According to the Deputy Commissioner, it was one of the offshoots of the movement among the Namasudras to improve their social status by refusing to serve as boatmen or *palki*-bearers. This irritated their former Muslim employers and the dispute about the impounding of a Namasudra's cow trespassing in the field of a Muslim led first to the Muslims being beaten up by the Namasudras and then, a few days later, to this fierce riot. The names of 39 Muslims involved in the disturbances were obtained and 11 of them were arrested and sent for trial.²⁰⁷

So, on all the three occasions, we find, petty disputes were apparently enough to cause enormous tension leading to widespread violence. Only in Sylhet there was some background of a prolonged strained relationship between the two communities. Whether any *agent provocateur* was involved in one or all of these cases is a matter of conjecture in view of the paucity of information. But the Hindu press wasted no time in seizing this opportunity to win over the Namasudras by supporting their cause and condemning Muslim rowdyism. A leading article which appeared in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on May 25th, alleged that an inflammatory and "filthily abusive" pamphlet entitled *The Cow and Hindu-Musalman* actually provoked the Muslims to attack the Namasudras and might cause further communal violence. Although the government wanted to describe these riots as purely local in nature, the Hindu leaders wanted to tag it to the greater question of Hindu-Muslim relationship, as Surendranath Banerjea saw in them "further evidence of the baneful effects of the Partition."²⁰⁸

The controversial pamphlet was, however, forfeited in June under the Indian Press Act.²⁰⁹ The nationalists now felt the more urgent need to do something more constructive. The United Bengal Provincial Conference which was held in Faridpur on the 29th and 10th of September, 1911, therefore, resolved "to take earnestly in hand" an elaborate programme of "social reform, especially (for) the elevation of the neglected classes".²¹⁰ Lt. Colonel U. N. Mukherjee, the author of *The Dying Race* (1909), was specially invited to participate in the 'Social Conference' which was supposed to organise "attempts to improve the status of the Namasudras and other 'depressed classes' and

to bring them into the fold of organised Hinduism”²¹¹ But the ever-widening gap between promise and achievement gave the Namasudras adequate reasons to suspect the sincerity of such attempts.

The Brahmo Samaj had also started social work among the untouchables through its Depressed Classes Mission founded in 1909 under the guidance of Sibnath Shastri. It started its first centre at Beras, a Namasudra village in the district of Dacca. And then in different areas of Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, the Mission under the able leadership of people like Harinarayan Sen, did admirable work among the Namasudras and others, providing them with free education and free medical care.²¹² But even then, the record of the Depressed Classes Mission was poor compared with the Christian Missionary efforts. And in 1911, at its annual meeting held in Calcutta, it was openly admitted that the Mission had not made much progress due to lack of finance.²¹³

But mere excuses were not enough to impress an ambitious group like the Namasudras, who were striving to put an end to their poverty, illiteracy and social disabilities. To them the record was more important and an unimpressive record was taken as an index of insincerity. The result was further alienation, the extent of which can easily be measured from the history of the two papers related to the Namasudra movement. The *Namasudra Suhrid*, a “non-political” monthly, published from Orakandi, the main nerve-centre of the movement, was the original organ of the caste. It was edited by Aditya Kumar Chaudhuri, a Namasudra *pandit* of the Upper Primary School, Rasiani (Faridpur) ; the proprietor was Sashi Bhusan Thakur, son of Guruchand, and the publisher was his younger brother Surendranath. In late 1908 another weekly entitled *Namasudra* was started in Dacca in order to further the interests of the caste. It was owned, edited and published by Keshab Chandra Das of Chandshi,²¹⁴ a Namasudra by caste who had studied upto the Entrance class at the Arya Mission School, Calcutta. The tone of the paper was in general “moderate”, but often it showed a tendency of attacking the high caste Bengali government servants, but not the government, for allegedly neglecting the interests of the Namasudras.²¹⁵ From the 31st March, 1910, however, the paper ceased to be printed, only to be revived once again from the 14th of July,²¹⁶ when the staff of the Jhalakati National School took it over in order “to gain over the Namasudras to the agitation. . . .”²¹⁷ From now on it was edited by Anath Bandhu Sen, a Baidya teacher of the Jhalakati National School, and was published by a

Kayastha of Ujirpur, Lakshmi Charan Das.²¹⁸ Around 1911, its tone was openly "anti-government and disloyal" and its well-publicised avowed object was to mobilise "the Namasudra class who were indifferent to the *swadeshi* agitation".²¹⁹ The *Namasudra Suhrid*, however, retained its earlier character and organisation and continued to be "non-political" and "chiefly social".²²⁰ In this context, what is important to note is the ever-increasing popularity of the more loyal *Namasudra Suhrid* and the declining circulation of *Namasudra* since its take over by the nationalists. In 1908, the circulation of *Namasudra* was 500, while that of *Suhrid*, 550; in 1910, the year of the nationalist take over, the circulation of *Namasudra* went down to 300, while that of *Suhrid* to 450; but in 1911, the year of the Census, while the circulation of *Namasudra* remained at 300, that of *Suhrid* shot up to 700.²²¹ The figures are perhaps adequate to give us a clear idea about the growing alienation of the Namasudras, at least the educated Namasudras, from the cause of nationalism around the year 1911.

However, in the same year the nationalists had a real opportunity to win over the Namasudras by utilising Gokhale's Compulsory Elementary Education Bill. On the 16th March, 1911, Gokhale introduced his bill in the Legislative Council "to make better provision for the extension of elementary education" by introducing gradually "the principle of compulsion".²²² The government response was not at all favourable. The government of Bengal was "opposed not merely to the specific provisions, but also to the introduction, at the present juncture, of the general principles embodied in the Bill."²²³ Sir Lancelot Hare was more categorical in pointing out the actual political implications of the Bill. In his opinion, it was "premature and impolitic" for it would "promote discontent and social unrest among the masses."²²⁴ Moreover, it would inevitably involve special taxation which would breed further discontent—more especially because there was already a possibility of additional taxation to make good the loss of opium revenue.²²⁵ The nationalists, gave a full-throated support to the Bill. The United Bengal Provincial Conference in September and the Indian National Congress at its Calcutta session in December, adopted resolutions in its favour and urged the government to enact it into law.²²⁶ The local organisations and their leaders were at the same time active in mobilising popular support in favour of the Bill.²²⁷ But the government's fear of a social revolution arising out of compulsory education was fully shared by the orthodox section of society. A Hindu *zamindar* could not con-

ceal his apprehensions when he wrote to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, that the "system of the whole-sale spread of education of the masses...will cause a great and violent disturbance in every phase of the present settled order of things ; and will throw the whole country, as it were, out of its equilibrium, and such a system...will not only...spoil the temper of the masses, but will tend to upset and disturb all the harmonious relations now existing between various classes and communities, domestic relations not escaping its disturbing influence."²²⁸ Although the Bill was almost unanimously supported in some of its features by the vernacular press, the organs of the orthodox section of the community viewed it with considerable misgiving. As they apprehended, it was likely to foment social unrest within the community by imparting to the lower classes a smattering of education and imbuing them with a spirit of insubordination and intolerance of control by the higher classes. "It is therefore, better", wrote *Hindu Ranjika*, one such paper, "that their children should remain altogether illiterate than have a very slight smattering of education."²²⁹

But such a proposal of the orthodox Hindus could not be considered as 'better', by those who thought that for centuries they had been "smarting under their yoke of bondage".²³⁰ In fact the Compulsory Elementary Education Bill was the only concrete nationalist proposal in which the Namasudras saw possibilities of fulfilment of their aspirations. Their organ *Namasudra Suhrid* wholeheartedly welcomed the Bill because of the chances of an elevation of their social status through primary education. It ascribed the backwardness of the community to poverty which was perpetuated over years as their young men, without any education, had no other alternative but to pursue their hereditary occupations. The only agency through which the poor Namasudra children could get some education was the missionaries ; but their efforts were often misrepresented. So in this grim situation the proposed extension of primary education on the basis of compulsion was all the more welcome to them as to the other depressed sections of the society.²³¹

But the nationalist leadership failed to make effective use of this sentiment. In December, 1911, came the Durber Declaration about the annulment of Partition. And in their jubilation, the nationalist leaders failed to take note of the possibilities of using this issue in order to win over the sympathies of the Namasudras and the other 'depressed classes' whose political support was necessary not only for the *swadeshi* movement but for the success of the later political movements as well. Guru-

chand was honoured by the government for his consistent loyalty²³² and Namasudra separatism became far more firmly entrenched—so much so, that even Gandhi's appeal in the days of non-cooperation could not make any considerable breakthrough.²³³

VII. Conclusion

The Namasudra movement was thus a story of social segregation, protest and political separatism. It weakened the nationalist movement in a way similar to the bid for power by the separatist Muslim politicians. The majority of the Namasudra agriculturists dwelt in the uninhabitable swamps of eastern Bengal. The constant interaction with a hostile nature bred in them a spirit of independence and made them a virile, industrious and martial spirited people. A growing sense of self-respect, arising out of their gradual transformation into a peasant community in course of the nineteenth century, made them conscious of the contempt Hindu society treated them with and the economic exploitation the high caste Hindu gentry subjected them to. This consciousness first of all led to an articulate protest against the social and economic injustices perpetrated on them for centuries. Later it took the shape of political separatism, a strategy that appeared, in an age of institutional politics, to be most appealing and effective to the leaders of a community striving to come out of its backwardness. However, in this movement, we may detect two distinct levels of consciousness and two different levels of movement, but at the same time an effective symbiosis between the two.

The Namasudra movement, it is true, was organised from the top, by a tiny, prosperous and educated section. These people who had moved up in social position in a secular context soon began to feel the gap still existing between their secular status and ritual position. But they were yet to evolve a distinct social identity of their own and had by no means lost their linkages with the less fortunate peasant population belonging to their caste. They were as yet too weak to form a separate political interest group and, because of their extremely low ritual position, too distinct from the high caste Hindu educated community to make a front with them to press for their political demands. On the contrary, having little economic surplus in their hands and being ill-equipped to take advantage of the political concessions in competition with the high caste educated Hindus, they did not feel any attraction for the political demands

of the nationalists. They began to think in terms of special privileges from the government, which they thought would benefit the entire Namasudra community vis-a-vis the more privileged upper caste Hindus and thus ensure a corporate social mobility in the upward direction. Hence they decided to move from pure social protest of the late nineteenth century to political separatism in the early twentieth. The promise of patronage with the prospect of being treated as equals, created among them a different perception of history and a different attitude to the colonial government. The present seemed to be an improvement over the past and indicative of a better future, when there would be no more discrimination on the basis of caste and the on-going system of distribution of wealth and power would be restructured to allow them a share too. They opted for loyalty to the British government, for it seemed to be the best way to ensure this desired readjustment of the social balance.

However, at another level, in the consciousness of the peasantry at the bottom, much more evident was a spirit of 'protest.' They seem to have very little idea about the nature of the colonial government; nor did they bother about institutional concessions which they could hardly take advantage of. But what they could immediately feel and realise was the fact of social degradation and economic exploitation perpetrated on them by the high caste Hindu gentry. A growing self-awareness of an emerging peasant community led to a spontaneous protest against it. As a mark of defiance of the social authority of the higher castes, they refused to accept degrading menial jobs or to serve as boatmen and palanquin-bearers for them. And where the oppression of the gentry crossed all tolerable limits, they looted *bazars* or broke into the houses of their landlords. When the government was helpful, as during the commutation proceedings, they stood by it and took advantage of the situation. But when the state machinery came to the rescue of their harassed landlords, they would not hesitate to take up *lathis* and *daos* against the police. This self-awareness of the peasantry was to some extent the result of the efforts of the leadership at the top, which could also effectively channelise the attitude of defiance it generated into a well-organised movement. Using their caste, religious and kinship ties and by highlighting the plight of the poor Namasudra peasantry, as well as articulating their grievances against the high caste gentry, they successfully mobilised the masses behind their political programme. The organisational network of the *Matua* sect, though informal at this stage, brought broader community consciousness and greater social mobilisation. It brought about a symbiosis between the two levels of

‘protest’ mentality, one against low ritual position and continuing exclusion from the sources of wealth and power, and the other against social humiliation and economic exploitation. The common object of their opposition was the high caste Hindu. And the colonial government, the enemy of their enemy, was their natural ally.

The nationalists, both moderates and extremists, failed to evolve an alternative political ideology rooted in mass consciousness. They were not, as we have seen, indifferent to the social developments among such lower castes as the Namasudras; nor could they afford to neglect the phenomenon of political separatism growing among them out of a sense of social and economic deprivation. But the prejudices of the society they belonged to and the economic interests of the classes they came from, stood in their way and prevented them from offering any effective social or economic programme for integrating these aggrieved lower castes with the rest of Hindu society. The promises they put forth soon proved to be empty ones and failed to convince a socially ambitious community such as the Namasudras. They were no longer prepared to wait. As their aspirations could not be accommodated within the process of the freedom struggle, they preferred to stay away from it. They were even prepared to oppose it, if in such a course of action they could see possibilities of fulfilment of their own social ambitions. And this loyalty was systematically encouraged, on the one hand, by the Christian missionaries through their benevolent activities and on the other, by the British government, through its policy of fanning the latent tensions of Hindu society by occasionally giving material concessions to the ‘depressed classes’ and consistently showing verbal sympathy for their grievances. All these tendencies later on led to the development of a separate backward classes identity with the Namasudras as the main force of the movement in Bengal.

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7

THE CROWD IN CALCUTTA VIOLENCE, 1907-1926

SURANJAN DAS

Popular violence has been a recurrent feature in the life of Calcutta. Throughout the history of nationalist movement the colonial government had to deal with crowd action, the incidence of which significantly increased since the second decade of the twentieth century. Taking the nineteenth century as a reference point it is perhaps worthwhile investigating the situation as it developed. There were certainly riots in Calcutta even before 1897. But the Tala violence of 1897 was probably the first to engage widespread attention both in government and among the public.¹ The turn of the century brought to surface increasing tensions in the city's social fabric and the riots which rocked Calcutta in 1907, 1918, 1919 and 1926 took place on a scale hitherto unknown. The present paper seeks to understand how during these riots the crowd acted, what was its composition, and what were the reasons that prompted violence. The result would hopefully be a contribution to attempts of bringing the "boundaries of history closer to those of people's lives".²

I

The immediate occasion of the 1907 riot was the police move on 2 October to break up a Swadeshi rally at Beadon Square on charges of 'disorderly conduct'. After this, for three days (i.e., until 4 October) the entire area under Jorasanko, Burtola, Kumartuli and Shyampukur *thanas* (police stations) was given over to rioting and looting.³ (See Map)

Rioting in October 1907 primarily consisted of repeated clashes between the armed police and a crowd either unarmed or at most equipped with stones and various kinds of sticks.⁴ The rioters brickbatted the police from bylanes and house-tops and fled into *gullies* or escaped from houses by the back exits.⁵ The

incident involving Sergeant Walters can be taken as a case study.

The police on October 4 met with a fusillade of bricks from a two-storied house at the corner of Chitpur and Beniatola Lane. . . . Police decided to take it by storm . . . Sergeant Walters unhesitatingly decided to go up first, little knowing what was in store for him. When he reached the upper floor he placed his left hand on a railing on the terrace so as to drag himself up, when one of the inmates rushed up and hacked at his hand with something in his possession. The blow cut through Walters' coat, and his left hand was nearly severed just above the wrist.⁶

While the Anglo-Indian community reacted sharply against this incident and created a fund in aid of the Sergeant, the Bengali newspapers, such as, the *Sandhya* (11 Oct. 1907) cartooned Walters as 'The Maimed'.⁷

The rioters received assistance from diverse social groups. Collins' enquiry brought to light the way in which they were helped by prostitutes inhabiting "most of the upper rooms bordering the Chitpur Road".⁸ There are press reports on how the rioters gained refuge in brothels which were subjected to police raids and searches.⁹ Interestingly, the house where Walters had been attacked was a cocaine den and a safe harbouring place "for every type of miscreants". Among those who reportedly helped the rioters in this area was even a *jatra* (open theatrical performance group) called the *Rambagan Jatra Party*, the members of which were mostly 'poor folk' from Bankura, an outlying district of the metropolis.¹⁰

Attempts to disrupt the transport system was another aspect of crowd behaviour. Tramcars and passing vehicles were ready victims. According to one estimate twenty-nine tramcars were damaged in the first two days of the violence.¹¹ Street lamps were generally blown out during confrontations. One finds elements of continuity between these trends of 1907 and those experienced on the streets of Calcutta in the late 1960s.

The 1907 tumult witnessed looting in Central and North Calcutta between Beadon and Baghbazar Streets, particularly in Sovabazar, Grey Street and Shyambazar.¹² The main targets of the looters were consumer goods or daily necessities. Among the forty-two cases of shop-looting that were examined, thirteen were sweet-meat and *jalpan* shops, six fish-stalls and one umbrella

shop. But not a single instance of the looting of any jewellery shop in the area was recorded.¹³ Despite the absence of any reported case of rape, there were attempted "molestations of females going to bathe in the river in the early mornnig".¹⁴ Most of the lootings, except those of the Shyambazar fish-stalls, took place at dusk.¹⁵

There was the natural dose of anti-English feeling in the affray. The crowd cried *Bande Mataram* and *Mar Feringi Sala* (kill the alien English)¹⁶ and attacked Europeans on open streets.¹⁷ The *Englishman* viewed these happenings as the culmination of Bengali ill-feeling towards the 'whites' that had been growing since the past ten years.¹⁸

According to an estimate the Beadon Square rally was nearly 2,000 strong.¹⁹ The Police Inspector Mohammad Fazl who was present at the Square described the crowd as an admixture of 'respectable and lowclass people'.²⁰ When the disturbance started the rioters comprised mainly students and other young Bengali Hindus who usually 'attended public meetings' of those days.²¹ The *Jorasanko Thana Report* characterised the Beadon Square gathering as 'petty agitators of the Swadeshi variety'.²² The *Weston Enquiry Report* reiterated,

From the evidence recorded by me and from the cases subsequently heard in the Courts, there cannot be the slightest doubt that Bengalis of the Babu or *bhadralok* class took a very prominent part in it. Their weapons were sticks and stones ; and the latter were thrown not only from the street . . . but (also) from the roofs and verandahs of houses, where the throwers were safe from retaliation.²³

Not unnaturally, the victims of police assaults at the Square included many *Babus*—Babu Hari Das Chatterjee ; Babu Bhujanga Bhusan Bose (great grandson of Radhakanta Deb) ; Babu Girija Ghoshal and Babu Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee, to name a few.²⁴ The Lt. Governor of Bengal lamented that the 1907 disturbances were initiated by a group which had been traditionally 'well behaved'.²⁵ The crowd fighting the police thus contained a predominance of, what the government called 'respectable Bengalis' who mainly comprised the 'Swadeshiwallas'.²⁶

A sample analysis of persons arrested or found guilty on rioting charges has been attempted.²⁷ It supports much of what has just been noted. All the forty-six accused were males. At least ten were youths : students or those earning their living by

such 'petty jobs' as packing macassar oil bottles. Only three were non-Bengalis. The majority came from the Bengali *bhadralok* community.

The crowd looting the shops, however, was different. It consisted of what the official records contemptuously categorised as 'chotoloks', i.e., the people of the lower social order, such as, labourers and 'unruly elements' like the *domes*, *bagdis*, *mehters*, *dhangars*, carters and *nikarees*, many of whom were Muslims and from the upcountry.²⁸ The Chief Secretary to the Bengal Government reported how this 'disorderly group' joined the riot and "began working on their own account just as they did during the Talla violence of 1897".²⁹ The participation of such social groups not only increased the intensity but transformed the character of the violence. A shift in the targets of the crowd can, for example, be noticed through a transition from an exclusive concentration on the police and the Europeans to the well-to-do Hindus and *bhadraloks*. Very often this assumed the form of antagonism between the Bengali *bhadralok* and the non-Bengalis of the metropolitan populace. The Report of the Unofficial Enquiry Commission is replete with *bhadralok* allegations of 'discriminatory lootings'—the Bengali-owned shops being pillaged and the neighbouring non-Bengali stores remaining untouched.³⁰ The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* referred to an eye-witness account of shops left undisturbed once they were known to belong to a non-Bengali.³¹ The *Bangabasi* published a provocative account of assaults on the Bengali passers-by while the Marwaris and other Hindustanis were left unharmed.³² It is difficult to explain the sudden outburst of this sectional conflict. But it needs to be stressed that the non-Bengalis in Calcutta, barring the few Bhatia and Marwari merchants, were socially and economically in a disadvantageous position compared to the Bengali *bhadraloks*. It was natural for these social groups to remain mutually antagonistic and the feeling of dissension among the non-Bengalis found an outlet when normalcy was disrupted.

The looting crowd also included the *dingiwallas* (boatmen)—again mostly upcountry Muslims—who, when questioned by the police, admitted that their participation in the violence was not due to political or ideological motivation but a reaction to the economic distress caused by the introduction of a ferry service that had put their livelihood at stake. To quote a contemporary observer :

Things were quiet on Wednesday night (2 Oct.) and the dingiwallas were bemoaning their hard fate, when news

came of the disturbances in Beadon Square. With a shout of gratitude to Allah they all beat up unanimously for the scene of operations and were engaged in pleasant and congenial works of looting for the next few hours. They retired laden with spoils, vowing that laden piracy was much more profitable than the same profession as it is practised in Hooghly and agreeing that one riot a year would enable them to live in comfort all the time.³³

This extract from the *Empire* was approvingly quoted by the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. The dramatic description betrays an obvious prejudice against the *dingiwallas* and, interestingly, the mouthpieces of colonialism and Hindu elite nationalism were affected by the same sort of sensitivity. What, however, becomes clear from the excerpt is that the times presented a threat to the 'moral economy' of the boatmen who expressed their wrath by participating in the ransacking acts during the nights of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th October.

It is thus possible to identify two distinct strands within the 1907 violence—on the one hand the developing contradiction between nationalism and imperialism and on the other, a manifestation of internal dissension within the metropolitan society itself. Occasionally the two overlapped. The *dingiwallas*, for example, could have been basically reacting to an economic crisis. But once they confronted the police they clashed with imperialism too. There were, however, occasions when no intermingling of the two strands occurred, as in the case of the bhadralok-non-Bengali clashes.

Much of the riotous climate in 1907 was generated by the highly politicised atmosphere following the partition of Bengal.

Public men were convicted of sedition and sent to jail, and they refused to appeal against the sentence passed on them. Others went to jail voluntarily. Schools-boys were marching to gaol like common felons and (police) treated them as such.³⁴

The Riot Resolution of the Bengal government referred to the subversive nature of "the violent speaking and writing . . . indulged in by irresponsible (i.e., Extremist) agitators".³⁵ An English daily cited the 'scarcely veiled incitement' by the vernacular press "to resist lawful authority (i.e., the Raj)".³⁶ The presence of the British Labour Party leader Keir Hardie was a morale booster for Indian political leaders and his criticisms of the Home gov-

ernment were approvingly quoted by them to justify their moves against the Raj. To what extent the looting crowd was directly stirred by such exercises is doubtful. But increasing infusion of white-black racialism experienced in their daily lives bred a 'hostile psychology' in the Calcutta popular mind. The growing popular restlessness was testified to by the governmental admission of a significant rise in the number of 'true cognisable crime cases' in the city.³⁷ The term 'crime' in colonial records was used to imply non-political breach of law as well as political offence against the British state power. Hence, a general increase of crime would cover growing lawlessness that had nothing to do with politics and growth of political consciousness among the petty *bhadraloks* and labourers, producing in time a common discontent against the government. In such a situation the city became conducive to a riotous climate.

Moreover, the days preceding the outbreak witnessed an upward swing in the price-level which was not supplemented by any variation in the wage-level. Material conditions for the unemployed and those with fixed incomes became particularly distressing.³⁸ The leading editorial in *The Englishman* (10 Oct. 1907) entitled 'The Gaunt Spectre' aptly revealed the accentuating economic crisis of the poor in Calcutta who were most active during the lootings.

This economic crisis could not, however, by itself have caused the 1907 riot. It was a part of the broad conjuncture. But what appears interesting is the fact that the hands of the looters stretched out specially to foodstuffs and groceries whose prices had registered a recent rise.³⁹

II

The immediate context of the Calcutta riot of 1918 centred round the government determination to prohibit a Muslim rally convened on 8 September in the vicinity of the Nakhoda mosque for expressing the community's anger on a number of wide-ranging issues : the imprisonment of the Ali brothers of Khilafat fame, the 'improper' recognition of Muslim rights in the Montagu Reform Scheme, the absence of facilities for performance of the *Korbani*, and the insults accorded to the Prophet by a passage in the *Indian Daily News* of 27 July 1918. The violence began on 9 September following an allegedly unprovoked firing from a Marwari house in Zakaria Street upon the impatient Muslim crowd waiting for the return of their leaders from the Government House. Within few minutes the crowd went out of hand ;

the Hindus and Muslims fought each other for at least two days more until 11 September.⁴⁰

A major facet in the 1918 riot was armed confrontation between Hindus and Muslims—a feature absent in 1907. The brunt of Muslim ‘savagery’ in 1918 fell upon the Marwaris, the richest mercantile section among the Hindus. Scenes of Muslim crowd chasing a Marwari with upraised *lathies* and shouting *maro maro* (kill, kill) were common. Several Marwaris were stabbed in broad daylight;⁴¹ groups of Muslims armed with *lathies* and daggers stopped trams and taxis and searched for a *Marwari sala* who, if found, was manhandled and deprived of all his belongings;⁴² the Marwari houses in Central Calcutta were pillaged.⁴³ Perhaps the ‘most pathetic scene’ was witnessed near Zakaria Street on 10 September. A Marwari family travelling in a car was stopped by a Muslim crowd and the lady inmates were assaulted while the two babies were ‘dashed’ to death.⁴⁴ This anger against the Marwaris can be largely explained by their ‘speculative holding of stocks’ which had caused an increase in the price of cloth.⁴⁵ The average Muslim of Calcutta was thereby denied “the pleasure of clothing his son or daughter with new raiment for the coming (Id) festive days”, an anguish reflected in the contemporary press.⁴⁶ In such circumstances, it was natural for the Muslim crowd to concentrate on the Marwaris.

Others, and not well-to-do, upcountry Hindus occasionally felt the Muslim anger.^{46a} Among them were coachmen, *goalas* (milkmen), cobblers and *paratawallas* (sellers of a type of bread). We have also references to the stabbing of ‘ordinary’ Oriyas and Sikhs. Interestingly enough very few Bengali Hindus suffered at the hands of the Muslim crowd.⁴⁷ Not a single Bengali member of the police force was injured, although such officers as P.C. Lahiri were at the scenes of disorder day and night.⁴⁸

Another notable incident in Hindu-Muslim confrontation was Muslim attack on a temple. The Kolutola Jain temple, mostly used by the Marwaris, was forcibly entered by a Muslim crowd on the 9th September, but serious damages could be avoided due to ‘prompt police action’.⁴⁹ The attack on this temple can also be seen as a part of the general Muslim affront on the Marwaris.

Anti-European feelings already noticed in the 1907 upsurge, were marked in 1918. The European-owned ‘big Wolsey cars’ were damaged;⁵⁰ European jute merchants were assaulted;⁵¹ *sahibs* (a generic term for the whites) travelling in taxis were brickbatted.⁵² A letter to the editor of *The Statesman* reported the sense of panic ‘instilled’ among Europeans in the

southern part of the city by the 'low-class Muslims' inhabiting the area between Wellesley and Nonapukur tramway junction.⁵³

In other respects the crowd behaviour of 1918 were similar to that of 1907. One such trend was the clash between the rioting crowd and the police. This started since the Muslim procession was stopped on its way towards the Government House on the morning of 9 September. For the next two days the police were attacked from lanes, bylanes and house-tops. The police retaliated with firings on a number of occasions. The military, called out to help the police, even reportedly entered the Zakaria mosque, and in his testimony before the Non-official Enquiry Commission Fazlul Huq referred to bullet marks and blood stains inside the holy place.⁵⁴ While in some cases the police and the military drove back the rioters, at other points they had to beat a 'hasty retreat'.⁵⁵ Four hundred rioters were arrested on the very first day of the violence.⁵⁶ Among the policemen wounded were two Dy. Commissioners, three Inspectors, five Sub-inspectors, eight Head Constables and fourteen constables.⁵⁷

The violence in 1918 was also characterised by large-scale looting of shops in Zakaria Street, Lower Chitpur Road and Harrison Road⁵⁸—the very area which had experienced such scenes in 1907. Sometimes the crowd set fire to shops after looting them.⁵⁹ Attitude of the looters sometimes assumed such threatening proportions that the police had to withdraw from the scenes.⁶⁰

Patterns of looting in 1918 remained broadly similar to the 1907 outbreak—shops dealing with consumer goods or with articles whose price had just risen being the usual targets. Some Muslim stalls also suffered in the affray.⁶¹ There are examples of the intermingling of Hindus and Muslims during looting, the Hindus ransacking Hindu shops and the Muslims ravaging Muslim stalls. Thus, at Mullick bazar a Hindu *methai* (sweet) seller was caught red-handed laden with cloth looted from one of his coreligionists.⁶² Again, shops of the Hindu Delhiwallas were looted by their own religious fellowmen.⁶³

There were sporadic assaults on individuals. At Wellesly Street some Muslims could be seen dragging a woman into a taxi.⁶⁴ Hindu ladies in Strand Road were robbed of their jewellery.⁶⁵ Poor milkmen had their milk stolen.⁶⁶ In Central Calcutta many passers-by were manhandled.⁶⁷ Reference may also be made to an interesting incident reported by *The Statesman* (Sept. 11, 1918) from Upper Circular Road in Central Calcutta. On 10 September a group of looters besieged some shops

at 6 in the morning and then barricaded the main road with trees, municipal dustbins and ice vendors' carts. On top of this barricade a red flag was kept flying. One wonders what significance can be attached to the red flag in such a context. Is it plausible to consider the description in the light of *The Statesman's* known Bolshevik bogey, suspecting Soviet conspiracy behind every disorder within the Empire?

In analysing the crowd behaviour during the 1918 riot, labour upsurge deserves a special mention. Handwritten notices for attending the Calcutta rally were circulated on the night of the 9th September among the millhands at Garden Reach. The morning of the 10th saw nearly 10,000 employees of three large mills—mostly upcountry Muslims—refusing to turn out for work. Their first overt act of violence was an assault on an European mill foreman A. D. Woodward. Thereafter, a crowd of 2000 led by "some with mud-smeared bodies" marched towards Calcutta shouting and dancing to the beating of drums, carrying flags and brandishing *lathies* and knives until they clashed with the military at the Garden Reach-Circular Road corner. The loss of life at this point was 'heavy'. Fifteen were either killed outright or died shortly afterwards. Ten more died in the hospital where 21 also lay wounded. "If a fanatical mob, several thousand strong had swarmed across the Maidan and forced their way into the city consequences would inevitably have been most serious. . .", commented the Bengal Governor.⁶⁸ He described this Garden Reach affray as 'the height' of the trouble.⁶⁹

Another threatened crisis was experienced at Howrah. Nearly 800 Muslim employees of jute mills struck work 'to attend a Calcutta meeting'. They had "received inflammatory leaflets, purporting to be issued from the Nakhoda Mosque, to the effect that the Calcutta Mahomedans were making *jihad* (holy war) with the Kafirs and calling on the Howrah Mahomedans to help. . ."⁷⁰ Police interference ultimately restored 'normalcy'. An eyewitness account also reported 'the marching' of the Metiabruz millhands to a rally in the city.⁷¹ Other isolated instances of 'labour disturbance' can be cited. For example, nearly 1500 millhands of Belliaghata joined the looting crowd in the region on 10 September.⁷²

Thus, as in 1907, the riot in 1918 revealed shifting levels of violence. Immediately provoked by such issues as the disrespect shown to their Prophet, the outbreak increasingly came to be characterised by Muslim attacks on the Marwari property, the police, the Europeans and factory managers—all of which had

overwhelming class or racial, rather than simply religious overtones.

It is significant to note the concern of the Muslim leadership to restrain this broadening and popularisation of the violence. Already days before the actual outbreak some Muslim leaders such as Abdur Rahim had agreed with the Governor that the proposed mass rally involved "a serious danger of a breach of the peace".⁷³ By the 7th September when popular Muslim excitement had reached an ebullient height and the leadership still remained undecided about the exact course of action that was to be adopted, the Muslim crowd in and around the Zakaria Street started "shouting and calling in the name of the Prophet".⁷⁴ Bricks were thrown at the leaders 'to make them act'.⁷⁵ While some 'big shots' such as Fazlul Huq 'gracefully' retired from the scene, several 'Muhammadan gentlemen' such as Aftab Ali, Nawab Ali Chaudhuri, Nawab Abdur Rahman and Dr. Suhrawardy "asked for and received police protection".⁷⁶ There were thus sufficient indications of growing popular pressures for action and when on 9 September the forty-member assorted group of Muslim leaders failed to modify the government's rigid stand on the proposed rally, they realised how they had "raised a Frankenstein monster in the shape of a fanatical mob".⁷⁷ Not surprisingly, the Governor Ronaldshay noticed a 'strong disinclination' of the delegation to leave the 'comparative safety of the Government House'.⁷⁸ On the afternoon of 10 September even the extremist Muslim leaders such as Nazimuddin Ahmed, the Chairman of the Reception Committee formed to organise the rally, and the Imam of the Nakhoda mosque played into the Government's hands. They signed a leaflet 'sketched' out by the Governor himself which urged their coreligionists to cease violence.⁷⁹ Ronaldshay later recounted that he could sense how Nazimuddin Ahmed and his friends were "really frightened at the results of their agitation".⁸⁰ The leaflet—published in English, Urdu and Bengali—was circulated 'far and wide' and Ronaldshay was told "that it has had very good results".⁸¹

The rioting crowd in 1918 comprised mainly youngsters of the lower social strata. Of the 400 rioters arrested on 9 September, the overwhelming majority were "the very rag, tag and bobtail of Mahomedan Calcutta, there being hardly the presence of anyone respectable".⁸² The butchers, dressers and hide-dealers were particularly active and this led to a scarcity of meat—beef and mutton—in Calcutta markets.⁸³ The Dy. Commissioner of Police Bartley was himself stabbed with a butcher's knife in Central Calcutta.⁸⁴ The presence of the Peshwaris, coolies and of what

the officials called, certain 'unruly elements of Chitpur' was also noticed.⁸⁵ The Hindu activists were mostly upcountrymen. The contemporary press particularly refers to the *Benarasis* (toughs from Benaras).⁸⁶ The ice-vendors—not specifically mentioned in the records as to what community they belonged—were also active and the use of their ice-carts to barricade the roads caused a scarcity of ice on the 9th and 10th September.⁸⁷ Two women and a lame man could be even found among those accused for looting shops.⁸⁸

Another social group associated with the 1918 riot, as already noted, was the millhands of the Calcutta suburbs. The days of the turmoil witnessed cases of labour unrest which kept the tension in the city high. In fact, it was the attempted linkage between the crowd in the heart of the city and the labouring class of the neighbourhood that the Bengal Government considered as the 'most serious danger'. These jute workers were usually up-countrymen, the majority being Urdu and Hindi speakers from the United Provinces and Bihar.⁸⁹

Broomfield has explained the Calcutta riot of 1918 within the broader schema of political manoeuvres by the leaders of the two major communities who incited such clashes to extract from the Raj maximum possible political concessions.⁹⁰ Such an analysis, however, underscores other factors which helped to create a popular mentality congenial for the outbreak.

An examination of the context of the 1918 violence reveals an ideological backdrop to the restlessness among the Calcutta Muslims. At one level, since the entry of Turkey into the First World War against the Allies, the popular Muslim feeling in the city "had been daily confronted with the formidable and distressing task of reconciling the claims of loyalty to a Christian power as a citizen of the British Empire, with those of sympathy with Turkey as the centre and fountain-head of his religion".⁹¹ On another level this Pan-Islamism was matched by Muslim resentment against certain 'Hindu deeds' at home. An official report noted how "ranking deep down in the Muslim mind were bitter memories of Shahabad riots of last autumn when the Hindus flung themselves upon the Moslems of Bihar and burst open the flood-gates of fierce racial and religious passions".⁹² The lithographed Urdu letter sent out from Calcutta to Muslims all over India elucidating stories of Hindu 'hatred and contempt' and asking them to join the proposed rally in the metropolis illustrated the growing all-India communal loyalties of the Calcutta Muslims.⁹³ A provoking incident was sufficient for an outburst.

The pre-riot days also witnessed a rising price curve of such

daily necessities as kerosine and food stuffs⁹⁴ which contributed to the creation of a general climate of 'nervous excitement'. The economic hardships of the poor Muslims were aggravated by a malaria/influenza epidemic, popularly called the 'War-fever'. The government measures to combat the situation were inadequate and largely accounted for the nearly 50% rise in the city's death rate in 1918.⁹⁵ The areas worst hit by the epidemic were Kidderpore and those northern wards of the city which had a strong Muslim concentration. The inhabitants of these wards remained dissatisfied with the Calcutta Corporations's measures to alleviate their sufferings and, significantly, such areas were worst affected by the riot.

III

The Calcutta turbulence of 1919 was connected with the Rowlatt Satyagraha—the all-India movement against the Rowlatt Act—through which Mahatma Gandhi transformed himself from a 'local' to a 'subcontinental' leader. The news of Gandhi's arrest on the 10th April near Delhi had 'an electrifying' effect on the sensitive psychology of the Calcutta crowd and normal life in the city came to be disrupted between the 11th and 13th.⁹⁶

The absence of looting in 1919 marks it out from the riots of 1907 and 1918. Only six months after the September outbreak one finds in April 1919 a remarkable Hindu-Muslim fraternity. The Hindus of all shades—Bengalis, Marwaris, up-countrymen—and Muslims attended gatherings and joined processions in 'tens and thousands'. At a meeting in the Maidan the Muslims and Marwaris were found embracing one another.⁹⁷ The Marwari priests put vermilion marks on the foreheads of the assembled Muslims; the Hindus cried *Ali Ali*; national songs were sung in processions and rallies and the Muslims lent their voice to *Bande Mataram*.⁹⁸ In large gatherings drinking water was delivered from the same lorries to Hindus and Muslims alike and slogans such as *Hindu Mussalman Ki Jai* filled the air.⁹⁹ In an unprecedented move a joint Hindu-Muslim meeting was also held on the afternoon of the 11th inside the Nakhoda mosque, addressed amongst others by Hira Lal Gandhi, the son of the Mahatma.¹⁰⁰ Of course, such scenes of Hindu-Muslim 'comradeship' was a common feature of the Rowlatt Satyagraha in other cities.¹⁰¹

Assaults on Europeans were noticed both during the 1907 and 1918 riots. But expressions of anti-European feelings were decisively marked in the 1919 violence. Actual cases of assaults

on Europeans in 1919 might not have been numerous.¹⁰² But certain aspects of popular action revealed the intense anti-European psychology of the crowd. The Europeans were made to disembark from trams, buses and private vehicles and walk to their destinations.¹⁰³ At all important street corners the Europeans were forced to take off their *topees* (hats worn by Europeans) and proceed bareheaded, such actions being invariably accompanied with loud cheers and shouts of *Gandhi ki jai*.¹⁰⁴ European women were chased by the frenzied crowd which often occasioned police intervention.¹⁰⁵ At Chitpur Road in Central Calcutta a man running about with a *topee* was readily greeted with applause and nationalist slogans.¹⁰⁶ Sometimes when the Europeans tried to force their vehicles through the crowd they faced physical assaults.¹⁰⁷ The situation often took a serious turn, as the Howrah Station incident of the 12th illustrated.¹⁰⁸ The vicissitudes faced by Europeans in general become clear from the following experience of one of the victims :

On reaching the Chitpur crossing, I found myself in the midst of a small crowd of about fifty persons. Two or three amongst them ordered me to take off my hat and make my way up to Chitpur. There were loud laughs behind me, so I put my hat on again . . . I was (then) hurled against a shop-window, my hat was snatched off my head, somebody slapped my face, I was struck with a stick on the shoulder, and kicked . . . but suddenly the people moved off, and I saw that a police patrol car had come . . .¹⁰⁹

European hotels were another favourite target of the crowd. Particular mention may be made to the looting of the Bristol Hotel in Central Calcutta.¹¹⁰

Anti-government sentiment was noticeable in the violent incidents both during the 1907 and 1918 riots. But in 1919 this feeling was expressed in a different way through the closure of shops and business establishments. By the afternoon of 11 April the majority of shops, especially in the northern part of Calcutta, had their shutters drawn.¹¹¹ On the next day some shops did reopen in the early morning. But the call for a *hartal* (general strike) was given following clashes between the crowd and the police.¹¹² There is hardly any evidence to show the use of force in keeping the shops closed and the shopkeepers displayed, as the *Nayak* noted, "a strong undercurrent of self-restraint and self-sacrifice".¹¹³ The 1919 movement, the same paper remarked, was

not a product of 'ease-loving *babus*', but of 'the self-sacrificing people'.

An aspect of the crowd 1919 behaviour in tune with the previous two riots was the disruption of the transport system. Trams, buses, taxis, private cars, hackney carriages, etc., were forced off the road. Initially persuasive measures were adopted by the demonstrators but when they failed force was applied, vehicles being attacked with missiles of all sorts and passengers dragged out.¹¹⁴ Cases of the snatching of moneybags from tram conductors were also not uncommon.¹¹⁵

The police, the most visible manifestation of the Raj which the Satyagraha was challenging, became a natural target of the crowd. At different points along the Central and Northern parts of Calcutta the police parties were pelted with bricks, stones, lumps of wood and aerated bottles from housetops.¹¹⁶ The Dy. Commissioner Wilson and the Assistant Commissioner Cook were injured while combating a crowd of youths—mostly Muslims with a sprinkling of Marwaris—at Zakaria Street on the 12th April.¹¹⁷ On the same day a turbulent crowd in Howrah attacked a police picket and set its cars on fire.¹¹⁸ The extent of popular antagonism against the police becomes clear from the following account by a correspondent of *The Englishman* :

On Harrison Road men armed with scaffolding bamboos ran up to the vehicle shouting *Nai Jane Dega* (We shall not allow you to go). The European sergeant replied, *Jaye-ga, Hut Jao* (shall go, move away) . . . (Instantly) the crowd closed round us (the police) and stones began to fly rattling on the body and hood of the car. The men with the bamboo thrust them in front of the car . . . there were shouts of *Mar Sala* and *Mar dalo* (Beat them) . . .¹¹⁹

The police officers in such circumstances were saved only by the dexterity of the drivers of their vehicles.¹²⁰

Other incidents in Harrison Road can be cited as examples of a general indignation against the police.¹²¹ For example, the crowd greeted a person who was running across the road carrying a battered white helmet of the "type worn by police themselves". On another occasion a tall man holding aloft a 12 feet long bamboo stood in the midst of the road, refusing to allow any police patrol to pass. This made the crowd to cheer him with shouts of *Gandhi ki jai* (victory to Gandhi). Isolated attacks on the police were also common. For example, two constables while escorting an Oriya prisoner at night were stopped by a crowd who

demanded the release of the convict. When the policemen refused, the crowd beat them up and rescued the prisoner. The constables had to be hospitalised.¹²²

In combating this crowd fury the police did not hesitate to use all available techniques. In some areas they even dropped 'dacoity wire netting' to prevent the crowd from 'advancing further'.¹²³ Very often unprovoked firing was resorted to. On the 12th at the Howrah-Chitpur Road junction the police, for example, discharged volleys of shots towards the upper storeys of the houses of such prominent people as Protap Narayan Roy, leaving at least thirteen lie 'in a pool of blood'.¹²⁴

The spread of the disturbance was associated with a change in the nature of the local leadership. The initial rallies adopting the Satyagraha pledge was of a 'composite' nature comprising lawyers, teachers, students, merchants as well as "the ordinary men in the streets" whom C. R. Das preferred to address as the 'Daridra Narayan' (the poor is god). Among the Hindus the Marwaris, Bhatias, Gujratis, Hindusthani durwans of Burrabazar and Punjabi and Sikh taxi drivers were prominent.¹²⁵ An index to the nature of the Hindu crowd at this stage is provided by the gathering in the Nakhoda mosque on the 12th, nearly half of which were Bhatias, Marwaris, Jains and upcountry Hindus.¹²⁶ Similarly, the Beadon Square rally on the same day reportedly contained 67% upcountry Hindus of various castes.¹²⁷

It is thus not unnatural to find the prominence of young upcountrymen—mostly aged between 18 and 35—in the list of the wounded and arrested.¹²⁸ An official report disdainfully refers to them as 'chokras' (young boys),¹²⁹ The upcountry street urchins between 15 and 30 years of age were also active in making the passengers disembark from buses and trams.¹³⁰ The following statistics represent a sample indicator of the crowd which became increasingly associated with actual violence.¹³¹

**Casualties (killed and wounded) in Calcutta disturbances on
12th April, 1919**

(A) Persons dead from police/military firing in Harrison Road

Name	Caste	Age	Address	Remarks
Chandra Pal Singh	Hindu (up- country)	40	183 Harrison Road.	

Name	Caste	Age	Address	Remarks
Sagar Mull	Do	35	17 Rup Chand Roy Street.	
Ramesh Chandra Manji	Do	18	12 Patuatola Lane.	Died in Marwari Hospital.
Unknown person	Do	27	...	Do
Nemai Chand	Do	25	68-1 Bartolla Street.	Do
Brijlal Bhatia	Do	30	...	Died in Mayo Hospital.
Puran Mull	Do	30	57 Khengra putty.	Do
Dukharam Ahir	Do	19	...	Do.

(B) Persons with non-fatal injuries from firing on Harrison Road

Name	Caste	Age	Address	Remarks.
Sewkaram Bias	Up-country Hindu	24	37 Armenian Street.	Discharged from Marwari Hospital
Peer Bux	Muslim	35	Armenian Street.	Do
Ram Dular Tewari	Up-country Hindu	27	61 Cross St. or 20 Khengra-putty.	Discharged from Mayo Hospital.
Mali Ram Brahmin	Do	28	1 Goenka Lane.	Do
Purusottam Ahir	Do	24	Jagannath Ghat.	Do

A sharp contrast between the previous Swadeshi and the 1919 crowd needs to be emphasised here. While the former had a predominance of *bhadraloks*,¹³² that social group was conspicuous by its absence in 1919, except in some stray incidents involving interference with the transport system.¹³³ The Beadon Square rally of the 11th reportedly contained only 25% Bengali Hindus and there was, what the Chief Secretary to the Bengal government noted, a "remarkable absence of Bengali (Hindu) students who generally form a large element in a Calcutta mass

meeting...".¹³⁴ The *Nayak* alleged that none of the Bengali Hindu leaders had signed the Satyagraha vow;¹³⁵ the *Dainik Basumati* repented how the enthusiasm of the upcountry Hindus had "cast us (Bengali Hindus) into the shade...".¹³⁶

On the other hand, the Marwaris—hitherto renowned for their 'peaceful avocation'—surprised the Bengal government by their participation in the Rowlatt Satyagraha.¹³⁷ This made the Governor Ronaldshay search for an explanation.¹³⁸ A sizeable section among the Marwaris came to be impressed with an idea that a common cause with the Muslims could have 'a restraining influence' on cow-slaughter of which they were the most vociferous Hindu critics. At the same time, noted Ronaldshay, the Mahatma was viewed as a "supporter of . . . orthodox Hindu aspirations" which made the Marwaris readily rally round the Gandhian call. Moreover, the Marwaris had reacted sharply against the government's new Excise-Profits Tax whose 'searching methods of enquiry' interfered with their economic pursuits. Ronaldshay refers to 'wildest rumour' of government's determination to take "Rs. 2-8 out of every Rs. 5 that a person possessed" and the anguish against the Raj that resulted from it, prompted the Marwari participation in the disturbance. Whatever might have been the 'true reason' for their participation, the presence of the Marwaris and Bhatias among the 1919 turbulent crowd was such that *The Times* spoke of a 'Marwari rebellion' in Calcutta.¹³⁹ The Chief Secretary to the Bengal government also characterised the disturbance as an affair of the non-Bengali population of northern Calcutta.¹⁴⁰ The Bengal Governor also himself accused the Marwari and Bhatias of the actual responsibility for the turmoil.¹⁴¹

It is, however, difficult to dissect the components of the Muslim rioting crowd because of the lack of available data. It appears that both the Bengali and non-Bengali Muslims, especially of the lower social order, were active. Among the Muslims present at the Nakhoda mosque meeting of the 12th April, the majority were 'illiterates'.¹⁴² The 'low class Muhammadans' of Central and North Calcutta *bustees* were singled out by the officials as 'notorious' in 'stone throwing incidents'.¹⁴³ Butchers were also prominent in the Muslim crowd.¹⁴⁴

Most contemporary observers referred to a gradual shift in the initiative for action to the 'ordinary people', particularly the upcountrymen—Hindus and Muslims.¹⁴⁵ The government itself acknowledged "the breaking of the monopoly control over political agitation by a handful of educated persons" and admitted that "the dumb had become voiced".¹⁴⁶ The popular 'radicalism', however, displayed an 'irresistible tendency' to seek 'shelter

behind the Mahatma's banner'—a trend which, as a recent study has shown, manifested itself throughout the period of Gandhian nationalism.¹⁴⁷ The on-the-spot organisers of such 'radical shifts' were by and large the subordinate social groups and established leaders asked themselves how this could have been possible.¹⁴⁸ The *Calcutta Samachar* commented that the Calcutta event had exploded the myth "circulated by the Anglo-Indian press that the untouchable and illiterate do not know what political agitation is. . .".¹⁴⁹

This increasing participation by members of the lower social strata contributed to the spread of the riot. It, however, alarmed the established leaders—Hindu and Muslim alike—who now issued manifestos condemning the disturbances.¹⁵⁰ *The Indian Muslim Association* and the *Committee of Central Muhammadan Association* even questioned the righteousness of allowing non-Bengalis to preach from the pulpit of the Nakhoda mosque.¹⁵¹ Similarly, the *Marwari Association* and the *Marwari Chambers of Commerce* expressed "deep . . . pain and sorrow at the disturbance" and affirmed "their loyalty to the government".¹⁵² The moderates also disliked 'the degeneration' of the Satyagraha¹⁵³ and their leader S. N. Banerjee 'unhesitatingly' approved of the Governor Ronaldshay's plan to censure the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* for "pouring poison into the mind of the youth of the country. . .".¹⁵⁴

All these demonstrate a crowd/leader dichotomy—a contrast between the attitude of the leaders and of the crowd. The two leading contemporary Bengali figures in organised politics—C. R. Das and Byomkesh Chakravarti—were never interested in a calculated 'breach of peace'. In their audience with the Governor on the 4th April they promised to exercise 'discretion' so that their speeches remained "moderate in tone, short, devoid of provocative language".¹⁵⁵ Both Das and Chakravarti confessed to the Governor that they did not even support the "idea of requesting people to close their shops".¹⁵⁶ The Governor also drew comfort from the fact that the plan of forming a Committee to frame a list of laws which were to be disobeyed had not materialised in Bengal.¹⁵⁷ But, as has been indicated above, once the subordinate social groups came out on the streets, they could not be made to play the restricted role which the leaders of institutional politics had chalked out for them. Very often the leaders of organised politics were pressurised by the crowd to undertake actions against their own convictions. For example, Byomkesh Chakravarti repented to the Bengal Governor how he was 'compelled' to address the historic joint Hindu-Muslim gathering in

the Nakhoda mosque, although he had no desire to do so.¹⁵⁸ This was an apt illustration of the dilemma in which the leaders of organised politics were placed—their resentment at the ‘mob’ going ‘out of hand’ but their inability to impose checks at that juncture. The irony of the situation was exposed when Chakravarti conceded the “duty of all law-abiding citizens to support (the) Government in putting down (the) disturbance”, but added in a sombre vein that “he must go some way with the organisers of demonstrators (i.e., the subordinate social group) or they would simply throw him over and any authority or influence he had with them would disappear”. Chakravarti even went to the length of praising the police action which had “hitherto . . . been all that could be desired and that they had sedulously refrained from provocation”. He also agreed to plead with ‘the people’ for the resumption of normal business since “Mr. Gandhi was not under arrest but was free to move as he wished in the Bombay Presidency”. Certainly the moderates such as Chakravarti ultimately had their ways and such ‘repeated brakes’ on ‘mass pressures’ were experienced throughout the nationalist movement.¹⁵⁹ Yet, shortlived popular initiatives and points of contradiction between organised institutional politics and the world of unorganised and autonomous popular actions were by themselves noteworthy and their implications need to be worked out. The outbreak of popular radicalism in Calcutta was particularly important as it came only days after contemporary observers had expressed surprise ‘at the lack of excitement’ in that city when Bombay and other areas were considerably agitated over the passage of the Rowlatt Bill.¹⁶⁰

The Calcutta turbulence of 1919 must be seen in the context of the presence in the city of the “same unmistakable signs of unrest” that could be noticed in the rest of the subcontinent. Calcutta shared the general all-India post-war grievance : while the Indian political and educated elite had strained their economic resources to fight for England in the First World War, the Raj retaliated by the repressive Rowlatt Act which resulted in their scepticism about the Montagu-Chelmsford scheme, and convinced them about the need for a ‘broader’ movement.¹⁶¹ On the other hand, the Khilafat question had turned the Calcutta Muslims against the British government. Gandhi’s call for the Satyagraha in 1919 resulted in a fusion of these various layers of discontent. The potentialities for a major political upsurge were revealed when a Calcutta daily commented that if the Calcuttans had been armed like the Irish “this unrest would have by this time developed into a rebellion . . .”.¹⁶² Frequent references are

found in official records to the 'scheming revolutionaries' in Calcutta¹⁶³ and many contemporaries even ascribed the 'current political crisis' to the influence of Bolshevism.¹⁶⁴ One can, however, question the reality of this Bolshevik threat since, as has been indicated above, the 1917 revolution had such a traumatic effect on the British bureaucracy that any 'violent threat' to the Empire's stability was thought to have Bolshevik overtones. Perhaps more cryptic was the observation of the Bengal Governor who described the political situation in the province as "smouldering and there is always the possibility of any lighted match falling into the powder..."¹⁶⁵ The Rowlatt Act provided the ignition.

The local press played an important role in generating a political climate conducive to a popular outburst in Calcutta. The nationalist newspapers—English and Vernacular—published articles on the 'un-British' rule in the country which must have affected at least the educated sections of the society.¹⁶⁶ Inflammatory leaflets couched in popular language were distributed in different parts of the city immediately before the outbreak.¹⁶⁷ An active propaganda campaign also sought to develop the charisma of Gandhi at the popular level so that the Mahatma's image could serve as a 'rallying point'.¹⁶⁸

The period preceding the present violence witnessed a rising price-curve of the daily necessities,¹⁶⁹ the situation being further complicated by increasing cases of food adulteration.¹⁷⁰ But how far this economic pressure directly contributed to the outbreak remains doubtful. After all, the 1919 outbreak witnessed no looting, even of those items whose rising prices had made them inaccessible to the common people. On the other hand, certain social developments on the eve of the tumult had made sections of the Calcuttans restive and the Gandhian Satyagraha in Calcutta, as in other cities, drew upon 'local' discontents to unite classes and communities into a movement of protest against the British government.¹⁷¹ Reference may, for example, be made to the distress of a large number of slum dwellers of North Calcutta whose huts were demolished for 'improvement schemes' without being properly rehoused by the Calcutta Improvement Trust.¹⁷² Again, the months preceding the turbulence were 'exceptionally unhealthy' in Calcutta, the mortality rate reaching the highest figure to be recorded since 1907.^{172a} Calcutta Corporation's measures to tackle this problem of public health were hopelessly inadequate and widespread public anger was evident. The Satyagraha provided a means of expressing such popular grievances.

IV

Compared to the preceding three riots, the 1926 violence was of a longer duration. It rocked Calcutta in three phases in quick succession : the first from the 2nd to 14th April, the second from the 22nd April to 8th May and the third from 11th to 25th July. The immediate cause of the outbreak on the 2nd April was the playing of music before a mosque. In the second phase the rioting was prompted by a street brawl between some Hindus and Muslims near the junction of the Mechuabazar Street, Cotton Street and Upper Circular Road in Central Calcutta. The third part of the riot was connected with a number of Hindu processions.¹⁷³

In many respects Hindu-Muslim confrontations of 1926 bear similarities with the 1918 riot. Much of the Muslim violence continued to be concentrated on the Marwari and Bhatia merchants. They were stabbed to death in broad daylight ; Muslim coachmen stabbed their own Marwari employers.¹⁷⁴ During the second phase of the riot the Marwari and Bhatia establishments in Central Calcutta were especially ransacked.¹⁷⁵ In July the houses of such wealthy Marwaris as Rai Saheb Ram Dco Chokani in the same region were pillaged.¹⁷⁶

Other non-Bengali Hindus and Sikhs, as in 1918, also occasionally faced the wrath of the Muslim crowd in 1926. Upcountry Hindu bus and tram conductors were assaulted ; Sikh taxi-drivers were dragged out and robbed of their cash and stabbed. Often the upcountrymen suffered because they were *durwans* of the establishments under attack.¹⁷⁷

During the 1918 disturbances only one instance of an attack on temple was recorded. But the 1926 strife witnessed the besieging of both temples and mosques on a far larger scale. In the first seven days of this riot as many as 11 temples/gurudwaras and 10 mosques/dargahs were desecrated.¹⁷⁸ The second phase of the riot experienced no damage of any religious institutions.¹⁷⁹ A recrudescence of the earlier trend, however, became marked in the third part of the riot.¹⁸⁰

The crowd violence in 1926 was also directed against the transport system and the police which had been the targets of popular fury in the riots of 1907, 1918 and 1919. Considerable losses were suffered by tramway and omnibus services and owners of private cars and hackney carriages.¹⁸¹ The police in 1926, however, suffered not only from isolated strikes but organised collective attacks as well. Thus on 3 April at 11 AM nearly 2,000 Muslims with lathies and brickbats at Manicktola-Narkeldanga

Main Road crossing assailed a police post and peace could be restored only by the military.¹⁸² On the same evening the police station in the Eden Gardens was stormed by Muslim boatmen of the Babu Ghat.¹⁸³ In the second phase of the riot some police barracks were systematically ransacked.¹⁸⁴ The July violence also was characterised by numerous planned assaults on Hindu and Muslim members of the Armed Police in Central Calcutta.¹⁸⁵ F. D. Bartley, the Dy. Commissioner of the Calcutta Police, was himself injured during this phase of the riot.¹⁸⁶

The 1926 tumult was associated with widespread looting too. The initial part of the riot witnessed the looting of at least 197 shops—106 belonging to Muslims and 91 to Hindus.¹⁸⁷ But the incidence of looting declined during the second part of the violence when only 21 cases were recorded.¹⁸⁸ The last phase of the riot did not witness much looting either.¹⁸⁹

The looting affray in 1926 shared the familiar trend of shops dealing with consumer goods as the usual target. The stationary stores, *modikhanas* and tea shops,¹⁹⁰ the cloth stalls,¹⁹¹ vegetable, fish, meat and fruit stalls,¹⁹² the sweetmeat shops and the pan, cigarette and biri stores¹⁹³ suffered most. Religious affinities afforded no guarantee of safety, a feature already noticed in 1918. For instance, the Muslim crowd ransacked the Peshwari fruitstalls and beat up the Muslim employees of Hindu firms who sought to protect their employers.¹⁹⁴

At another level one detects in the 1926 outbreak a trend which was not as marked during the earlier riots. This was an increasing use by the Hindu crowd of the houses of their political leaders as bases of operation which indicated heightened communalisation of the political atmosphere. Muslims were thus attacked with brickbats, bombs and firearms from the premises of such Hindu Mahasabha leaders as Madan Mohan Barman and prominent Marwari merchants such as Jamandas and Devi Prosad Khaitan.¹⁹⁵ In some cases the police raided these quarters and made arrests.¹⁹⁶

Unlike the 1918 riot another major aspect of the 1926 outbreak was isolated attacks in lanes and bylanes. Individuals were stabbed by 'small roving bands of opposing communities' who sprang on the victims without warning and vanished "in the labyrinths of small lanes and gullies" which characterised most of the affected areas.¹⁹⁷ The assailants usually took instant refuge amongst their coreligionists, giving not the least clue to their identities. The police in 1926, in contrast to 1918, had to deal not so much with large bodies of two opposing communities as with small groups of determined men. These isolated murders of

individuals took an ugly turn during the second phase of the riot, and, as the Bengal Governor himself confessed, no amount of military force could have prevented this.¹⁹⁹

The Hindu-Muslim strife in 1926 was also reflected in skirmishes between specific professional groups—a feature unnoticed in 1918. Thus, in 1926 the Muslim boatmen fought Hindu carters at the Jagannath and Nimtola ghats; the Hindu *durwans* assaulted Muslim crane drivers of the Port Commissioners' jetty; clashes occurred between the Muslim *khalasis* and Hindu carters and between the Muslim boatmen and Hindu coolies in jetties and the Dock.¹⁹⁹ The troubles in the Dock were viewed with particular alarm in official circles.²⁰⁰

Moreover, compared to the earlier riots the clashes in 1926 were characterised by greater organisation and planning. The Arya Samajists dressed themselves as Muslims and made feigned attacks on Hindus to incite the latter.²⁰¹ On 27 April a Bengali Hindu allegedly represented himself to be a Muslim and tried to provoke a riot by crying out that he had been assaulted by Hindus. Leaflets were distributed urging Hindus not to use certain taxis which had Muslim drivers.²⁰² The wide distribution of other provocative leaflets indicated the role of money and organisation in keeping the strife going.²⁰³ To quote a contemporary comment,

The leaflets...distributed in thousands, the meetings that have been held, the harangues that have been delivered, all suggest that somewhere in the background is somebody with funds and brains and a rudimentary kind of organisation.²⁰⁴

The nature of this organisation, however, can only remain a matter of speculation as long as further information is not available. In all likelihood, it was the Marwaris who provided the financial backing for mobilising the Hindu crowd.

Although the Muslim rioters did not display a comparable level of organisation, there were attempts at organised mobilisation on the Muslim side too. For instance, in the Central Calcutta bustees the Muslim inhabitants were encouraged to rise up by the beating of drums.²⁰⁵ Sometimes the Muslim crowd was well organised in carrying out their missions, as was noticed during their raid on a Hindu boarding house on 22 April.²⁰⁶

The crowd in the 1926 outbreak was predominantly composed of upcountry Hindus and Muslims from the lower social strata. Stephenson, a member of the Governor's Executive Coun-

cil, characterised the rioters as the 'upcountry crowd'.²⁰⁷ The *Guardian* remarked, "... the aggressive Hindus were almost entirely non-Bengalis—usually upcountrymen—whereas Bengali Mahomedans were (partly) involved...".²⁰⁸ The demography of Calcutta had always contained a sizeable immigrant section, the major catchment areas being Bihar (particularly the districts of Gaya, Sahabad, Patna and Monghyr), Orissa and the UP.²⁰⁹ These immigrants who inhabited the areas of Calcutta most affected by the tumult, were in all likelihood an important constituent of the 1926 riotous crowd.²¹⁰

Among the upcountry Hindus the carters and coolies of the Jagannath and Nimtola ghats, the Strand Road, the Docks and railway stations were prominent.²¹¹ Their involvement in the violence paralysed the business in the city.²¹² The *durwans* and *jama-dars* (sweepers) of commercial establishments and personal attendants (*lathials*) of Marwari and Bhatia merchants and such notables as P. N. Tagore were equally important accomplices in the violence.²¹³ The participation of the riot by the municipal coolies, watermen, *dhangars*, (scavengers) and *domes* (a low caste mostly engaged in cremating dead bodies) hampered the scavenging of roads in the disturbed sectors of the city.²¹⁴ The upcountry Hindus of Kansaripara and Lal Bagan, the upcountry millhands, irondealers, *goalas*, rickshawpullers and fruitsellers were no less active.²¹⁵ The presence of non-Bengali Hindu women among the looters was also noticed.²¹⁶

Turning to the Muslim rioting crowd one comes across recurring references to boatmen and crane-drivers of the Dock and jetties.²¹⁷ Muslim butchers and dressers also joined the rioting in large numbers.²¹⁸ Armed Peshwaris, coachmen, petty shopkeepers and fruitsellers and the 'low-class inhabitants' of Central and Northern Calcutta *bustees* were the other important activists.²¹⁹

Thus an anatomy of the riotous crowd reveals most of its components as members of the subordinate social groups. But occasionally Hindus and Muslims from the upper social strata joined the crowd during a rampage. For instance, in the Garpar Rioting case the accused Hindus included a student, a veterinary surgeon and some merchants.²²⁰ Similarly, young Muslims between 20 and 30 years of age who either owned landed properties or were engaged in professions participated in the violence.²²¹ Muslims charged with rioting also included merchants, contractors, landlords and trustees of mosques.²²²

Besides the Hindus and Muslims, other Calcutta communities often took part in the lootings. For example, some Anglo-

Indians were prosecuted by the Special Magistrate Bivar for looting cloth.²²³ One wonders whether they were the Anglo-Indians living in the *bustees* of Wellesley-Elliot Road area.

The feeling of panic was also kept alive, as in 1918, by the labour unrest in the mills of the metropolis and its neighbourhood.²²⁴ Official documents are replete with the fear of 'a union' between these restive millhands and the riotous crowd of the city.²²⁵ Fortunately for the Raj, no such conjunctures occurred.

Yet another prominent group among the 1926 rioters which deserve a separate treatment were 'professional anti-socials'—Hindus and Muslims—known in popular parlance as *goondas* (toughs). Sir Hugh Stephenson, a member of the Governor's Executive Council, observed, "...the goonda is the fuel of these disturbances, that is the hand that commits the worst excesses".²²⁶

Certain broad constituents can be identified within this 'goonda' category.²²⁷ There were, first, leaders of the goonda gangs who themselves did not usually participate in the violence but had at their back "an army of disciplined followers ever ready to go to any required length".²²⁸ Secondly, there were the registered bad characters—the goonda proper whose recorded number in the Calcutta *thanas* during the period was at least 1,000.²²⁹ Noted goondas such as Mina Peshwari, Shaikh Yusuf, Bishambar Choubey, Jogrup Tewari, Nur Mohammad, Sew Charan Bhur, Balmukund Misser, Alla Baksh Peshwari and Babu Jan were convicted with rioting charges.²³⁰

It is difficult to analyse the social background of these goondas because of a paucity of data caused by an inaccessibility to the police archives. But a perusal of some hitherto untapped 'goonda files' unfolds certain common features in the case of fourteen goonda convicts. All of them originally hailed from outside Bengal—one from Fyzabad (the United Provinces), one from Arrah (the United Provinces), one from Amritsar (the Punjab), one from Patna (Bihar), one from Kazipara (Bharatpur State), one from Bikaner (Rajasthan), seven from the upcountry, and one from even the far-off Jeddah (Arabia).²³¹ They settled at Calcutta in search of fortune in the process of which their association with bad characters was initiated. Again, all fourteen convicts lost their fathers in childhood which resulted in economic and emotional instabilities in their families. None but one had read upto the sixth class. This situation acted as a natural incentive to take up crime as an immediate panacea to their distress. The majority of them remained unmarried and assaulted young women of their localities. Once they joined the criminal

world they usually involved themselves in gambling, cocaine traffic and smuggling to provide themselves with a regular income.

Another group among the professional lawbreakers active during the riots were smugglers and keepers of gambling dens. They enjoyed the same position as leaders of the goonda gangs. When disturbances were rife in Calcutta they had at their beck and call a considerable number of bad characters who could be turned loose at the direction of their masters.²³² Such notorious cocaine smugglers as Dipen Hajan, Bachu Singh, Chuni Ahir were implicated in the rioting.²³³

Giving a sociological label to what the government called the 'professional anti-socials' is problematic. But judged by their behavioural standards and occupational patterns they may be said to comprise what Karl Marx called 'lumpen proletariat'. In many urban upsurges they emerged as the prime activists, led perhaps not so much by any ideological or political motive as by a reaction from their settlement in an environment with which their family was not originally habituated.

The 1926 violence needs to be seen in the context of an intensification of Hindu-Muslim tensions throughout India.²³⁴ The disruption of political alliance between the Khilafat and Congress parties at the all-India level and failure of the *Das Pact* at the regional level contributed to a significant growth of communalism in Bengal within institutional politics.²³⁵ The Government of India Report obviously referred to this development when it emphasised the role of the educated Hindu and Muslim elites in 'fanning current fanaticism'.²³⁶ Hopes of further power for popular representatives through constitutional reforms based on separate electorates was an additional incentive for political mobilisation along communal lines. This was partly reflected in the way Muslim and Hindu newspapers such as the *Matwala*, *Sultan*, *Durmukh*, *Hanafi*, *Jamayat*, *Islam Jagat*, *Mohammadi*, *Asr-e-Jadid*, *Bharat Mitra*, *Forward*, *Basumati*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, etc., were used to provoke their respective readers. Immediately before and during every phase of the riot a number of anonymous leaflets were also published to instigate communal tensions. Composed in popular language these leaflets took various forms—*notices*, *fatwas* and *communiques*.²³⁷

The crisis point, however, was reached when this communal distemper increasingly assumed a popular and general tone. The Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements had made Calcutta Muslims more conscious of their own communal identities and potentialities for mass action. It was not unnatural in this context to find by the end of 1925 a gradual emergence in the city

of a 'more popular and nebulous focus of Muslim attention'.²³⁸ This was matched by a sharp growth of popular Hindu communal organisations under upcountry leadership.²³⁹

Although the outbreak was caused by a conjunction of elite and popular communalism, a contradiction can be noticed between the two once the riot began.²⁴⁰ Primarily interested in using communal frenzy for extracting further constitutional concessions, the leaders of organised politics on either side were eager to keep the violence within controllable limits and thus condemned rioting when it reached a high pitch. Joint Hindu-Muslim meetings were organised by such leaders and appeals issued to "remove brains and organisation behind the scenes".²⁴¹ Such appeals usually went unheeded and in many instances the leaders were abused by the crowd.²⁴² This happened probably because the crowd was untainted by the vested interests of their leaders. Popular sentiments remained 'remarkably volatile' and violence in popular hands tended to be unrestrained and, as indicated above, their socio-economic grievances were expressed through a religious idiom. Significantly enough, the growing intensity of violence was accompanied by the emergence as local leaders of such subordinate social groups as carters, butchers, boatmen, durwans *jama-dars*, scavengers, coachmen and 'other men on the spot'. Thus, butchers such as Shaik Bhikoo of Garden Reach were convicted for organising their local coreligionists.²⁴³

The generation of a volatile situation was also facilitated by an upward swing of the price-curve of basic foodstuffs causing discomfort to the Hindu and Muslim poor²⁴⁴ and the rapid growth of unemployment²⁴⁵ which made the common people restive. But what was perhaps more crucial was the conjunction of this general popular discontent with certain other economic contradictions during the period under consideration. Mention may, for example, be made of the economic boycott of Muslims during the days preceding the April tumult when they were refused by the Marwaris any employment as labourers, dyers and coachmen.²⁴⁶ Again, most of the Calcutta Muslims lived in mud-built tiled houses many of which had been systematically demolished over the past few years by the Calcutta Corporation and the Calcutta Improvement Trust for 'beautification of the city'.²⁴⁷ According to one estimate the total number of persons thus unsettled was no less than 90,000 between 1911 and 1921.²⁴⁸ Among those affected were Muslim *kasais* and dock labourers, both of whom were active during the turmoil.²⁴⁹ Interestingly, a large number of new buildings erected on the sites of demolished *bustees* in Central Calcutta belonged to wealthy Marwaris.²⁵⁰ The sense of economic depriva-

tion that thus afflicted the Muslim mass had its natural outlet on this wealthy Hindu section during the tumultuous days.

V

The present essay is essentially a preliminary exercise in analysing popular violence in twentieth century Calcutta. With its reliance on official and principally archival sources the article suffers from a historical approximation. Violence has been taken as a behavioural condition at a point of time and within this limited framework the foregoing sections have tried to analyse the trends in crowd behaviour, the anatomy of the crowd and the occasions for riots in Calcutta in 1907, 1918, 1919 and 1926. Such a study can be an entry-point to answer such fundamental questions as what part does popular violence play in developing either class consciousness and class struggle or false consciousness in the Marxian sense.

Modern scholarship has successfully challenged the traditional Lebon visualisation of 'defiance and disorder' with total abhorrence and ascription of 'basest motives' and 'lurking criminal instincts' behind crowd action.²⁵¹ But it is also necessary to avoid what E. P. Thompson calls, 'a spasmodic view of popular history', viewing the riots as products of "compulsive...simple response stimuli" to deprivation, hunger or price rise.²⁵² Current European writings consider the rioters not as "miserable, uprooted, unstable masses" but as "self-conscious and self-activating" men and women "prompted by political and moral traditions that legitimise and even prescribe violence".²⁵³ What has been emphasised is the need to look at the popular consciousness which drives the crowd to violence, a point also stressed by recent Indian historians working on popular movements in the subcontinent.²⁵⁴ In this concluding section it is proposed to examine the consciousness which motivated the crowd during the riots of 1907, 1918, 1919 and 1926.

The sources of legitimacy for crowd behaviour during the outbreaks considered above must have varied. At one level the crowd was imbued with what has been called, a 'levelling instinct'.²⁵⁵ Whether in the non-communal outbursts of 1907 and 1919 or during the communal upsurges of 1918 and 1926, the anti-establishment aspect of popular consciousness always came to the fore. Attacks on the police as the visible representative to the Raj, the disruption of the communication system to dislocate the normal functioning of the state apparatus, the expressions of anti-European feelings—all were demonstrations of a notion of resis-

tance to the established order. At the same time, assaults on Marwaris, the trading group emerging as the chief indigenous exploitative hand, and the looting of mostly consumer goods or articles whose prices had just risen illustrate the remarkable single-mindedness and discriminating purposefulness of the crowd. These direct actions symbolised, as Rude has shown in the case of the preindustrial European crowd, "the imposition of some form of elemental natural justice".²⁵⁶ This was recognised by contemporary observers. Speaking of the lootings in 1926 the veteran Communist leader Muzaffar Ahmed thus noted,

The upper strata of society have all along been plundering the lower ones. The looting which has today taken place in Calcutta, under the cover of Hindu-Muslim dissensions, is but the reaction (to) from the spoilation (by the rich). The matter for regret is that the affair has floated before our eyes tinged with a religio-communal hue.²⁵⁷

Even the *Jugantar*, by no means a mouthpiece of the oppressed, acknowledged,

the Calcutta disturbances (of 1926) is, in reality, but an attempt on the part of the scum of the city, Hindu or Mussalman, to be avenged on the nobility or the merchants.²⁵⁸

All these suggest that the crowd, though "violent, impulsive, easily stirred by rumour and quick to panic", was neither fickle nor irrational. Violence in all four instances was part of a social process, beginning with the accumulation of community anger, expressed first through a provoking incident and then expanding into a community-wide uprising, threatening public order. The inherent anti-establishment consciousness of the crowd psychology endowed the four riots with a form of protest politics.

At another level it was a threat to their moral economy which gave a legitimacy to such subordinate social groups as *dingiwalas* for their participation in the 1907 riot. Another constituent of the crowd during the same outbreak—the *bhadraloks*—sought sanction from their 'duty' to undo the partition of Bengal which was seen as an affront on their traditional world. Again, during the two communal outbreaks of 1918 and 1926 the role of preachers and communal leaders in legitimising popular violence was direct. 'Defiance of true doctrine', 'the refutation of

false doctrine through dramatic challenges and tests' or even 'ridding the community of dreaded pollution'—all these appear to have combined to create the popular communal frenzy. One is reminded of an almost similar picture in the Catholic-Protestant religious riots in France.²⁵⁹ The image of a 'deliverer' also acted as a source of legitimacy for the crowd. We have, for instance, seen how in 1919 the extension and radicalisation of the original plan of the movement was legitimised around the image of the Mahatma.

It is, however, possible to identify a long-term change in the character of popular violence in Calcutta. Recent scholars have accepted possibilities of the coexistence of "congruence and asymmetry in the class-religious community relationship, simultaneously permitting expression of socio-economic grievances through a religious idiom and blurring class divisions".²⁶⁰ The crowd in both 1918 and 1926 betrayed the two contradictory trends—attacks on symbols of colonial and class oppressions as well as clashes between members of subordinate social groups. But it was the second feature which gained strength over a period of time and politicisation of communal violence increased at all levels, violence being resorted to for specific reasons of communal politics and not just for looting or vague religious issues such as music before mosques. The shift, as already indicated, was perceptible in 1926. By 1946 rioting and looting even at the most basic level became overtly communal.²⁶¹ On this occasion the Muslims carefully spared the shops of their coreligionists.²⁶² In all killings on the streets the targets were also carefully chosen—the Muslims systematically stabbing the Hindus and vice versa.²⁶³ Cold calculations and planned strategies now became integrated with the most elemental forms of violence deriving its strength from an upsurge of mass communal consciousness. The hegemony of communalist ideology over Bengal's political economy during those crucial years of the 1940s certainly had a stultifying impact on the incipient class struggle. This was a helpful 'prelude' to the truncated settlement of 15 August 1947. But this development deserves a separate treatment for which the present study can perhaps be a starting point.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

The article was submitted as early as 1984. My understanding on popular violence in Bengal has since changed substantially, especially in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation on *Communal riots in Bengal 1905-1947* (Oxford 1987). I am extremely grateful to

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179. *Report on the Calcutta Riots of April*, op. cit.
180. *Report on the Calcutta Riots of July*, op. cit.
181. File-174/26; *Report on the Calcutta Riots of April*, op. cit.; *Report on the Calcutta Riots of July*, op. cit.
182. File-174/26, op. cit.
183. Ibid.
184. ST April 24 1926.
185. *Report on the Calcutta Riots of July*, op. cit.
186. File-174/26, op. cit.
187. Ibid.
188. *Report on the Calcutta Riots of April*, op. cit.
189. *Report on the Calcutta Riots of July*, op. cit.
190. File-174/26, op. cit.; *Report on the Calcutta Riots of April*, op. cit.; *Report on the Calcutta Riots of July*, op. cit.
191. Ibid.
192. *Report on the Calcutta Riots of July*, op. cit.; ABP April 4 and 8 1926.
193. ST April 4 1926; *Report on the Calcutta Riots of April*, op. cit.; *Report on the Calcutta Riots of July*, op. cit.
194. ST April 6 1926; ABP April 20 1926; *Dainik Soltan* (Cal) April 17 1926, NNR No. 17 of 1926, WBSA.
195. File-174/26, op. cit.
196. ST July 21 1926.
197. File-4/27, Home (Special) NAI; *Report on the Administration of Bengal 1925-26*, op. cit., p. 163.
198. Ibid.; File-Home (Poll) 11/VII, 1926, NAI./See letter from Offg. Chief Secy, Bengal of July 3 1926, para-5.
199. File-174/26, op. cit.; *Report on the Calcutta Riots of April*, op. cit.; *Report on the Calcutta Riot of July*, op. cit.; ST April 28, July 9 1926; ABP April 28 1926.
200. ST April 27 1926.
201. Confidential note by Abdul Karim to Wilkinson, Private Secy, Governor of Bengal, File-P.5R/12/26, Home (Poll), WBSA.
202. *Report on the Calcutta Riot of April*, op. cit.
203. ST April 29 1926.
204. Ibid.
205. *Report on the Calcutta Riot of July*, op. cit.; ST April 25 1926; ST April 25 1926.
206. *Report on the Calcutta Riot of April*, op. cit.
207. Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. XXI, No. p. 10.
208. Quoted in ABP May 30 1926.
209. *Census of India 1921*, Vol. VI, Part-I, p. 20, para-13; *Census of India, 1931*, Vol. VI, Parts-I & II, p. 13, para-16.

210. The migrant section of the Calcutta populace mostly lived in Burrabazar, Waterloo Street, the Port and Canals, Kolutola, Fenwick Bazar, Alipore, Jorabagan, Muchipara, Collinga and Manicktola. See *Census of India*, 1921, Vol. VI, Part-I, p. 28, para-16.
211. File-174/26, op.cit., see Calcutta Police Commissioner to Chief Secy, Bengal; Confidential note by Karim, op.cit.; ABP April 16 1926; ST April 6 & 28 1926.
212. ST April 28 1926.
213. File-174/26, op.cit.; Confidential note by Karim, op.cit.; File-243 (1-7)/26, Home (Confidential), WBSA, see the police note; Rioting case before the Dy. Commissioner, Northern Div., ABP April 13 1926; ABP April 6, 7, 11, 13 and June 11, 13 1926; ST April 28 1926.
214. ABP April 29 1926; ST April 18 & 28 1926.
215. *Report on the Calcutta Riot of April*, op.cit.; *Report on the Calcutta Riot of July*, op.cit.; ABP April 24, 25, 28 & June 16 1926; Rioting case before Bivar, Add. Magistrate, ST May 16 1926; Rioting case before Khan, Magistrate, Jorabagan, ABP May 4 1926.
216. ABP April 21 1926.
217. File-174/26, op.cit.; ST April 6 & May 16 1926; ABP April 22 1926.
218. ST April 27 & 28 1926.
219. Report on the Calcutta Riot of April, op.cit.; Report on the Calcutta Riot of July, op.cit.; ST May 1 1926, see letter by Rama Lall; ST May 2, 11, 21, 1926; Manicktola Riot case before Sinha Bahadur, Sealdah Magistrate, ABP Nov 21 1926.
220. ST May 11 & Aug 5 1926.
221. Rajabazar rioting case, ST June 12 1926.
222. Rioting case before Justices Duval and Suhrawardy, ABP, May 8, 1926.
223. ABP April 20 1926.
224. File-174/26, op.cit.
225. File-112-IV-26-Poll., Report on the Political Situation In Bengal For the second half of April, NAI.
226. Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. XXI, No., p. 39.
227. Ibid., the discussion is based on the note presented by Stephenson before the Council.
228. Ibid.
229. Quoted from *The Guardian* in ABP May 30 1926.
230. ST June 10 1926; ABP June 10 1926; Rioting case before the Dist. Judge. Howrah, ST June 10 1926; ABP May 6 & June 11 1926; File-209/26, Home (Poll) NAI, see the Chief Secy., Bengal's, letter of Aug 5 1926; File-174/26, op.cit.
231. Files, Home (Confidential)—323 (1-6) of 1926, 237/1931, 876/1931, 518/1931 (1-6). All these files were seen on special permission at the Home (Poll) Dept. of the Writers'

- Buildings, Calcutta. Also see Files-Home (Confidential), WBSA—199/26, 365 (1-4)/27, 883/30.
232. Note by Stephenson, op. cit.
233. ST May 2 1926 ; Rioting case before Dy. Commissioner, Calcutta Police, ABP May 5 1926.
234. File-174/26, op. cit.
235. For a discussion on the elite aspect of the *Das Pact* see K. McPherson, op. cit.
236. File-4/27, Home (Special) NAI.
237. File-174/26, op. cit.
238. K. McPherson, *The Muslims*, op. cit, p. 159.
239. Ibid.
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252. E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, No. 50, Feb 1971.
253. Ibid. ; also see N. Z. Davis, 'The Rites of Violence : Religious riot in Sixteenth Century France', *Past and Present* No. 59 1973.
254. S. Sarkar, *Popular Movements*, op. cit.
255. G. Rude, *The Crowd In History 1730-1848* (London 1981) p. 224.
256. Ibid., p. 238.
257. *Langal* (Cal), Special Edition, April 9 1926, NNR No. 17 of 1926, WBSA.
258. *The Jugantar* (Cal) Aug 26 1926, NNR No. 17 of 1926, WBSA.

259. N. Z. Davis, 'The Rites', op. cit.
260. S. Sarkar, *Popular Movements*, op. cit., p. 31.
261. This becomes clear from the Evidence Volumes of *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* (Cal).
262. L/P & J/8/5/76/IOR, Calcutta Riots—Summary of Event, para-21.

8

FROM SUB-NATION TO SUBALTERN : EXPERIMENTS IN THE WRITING OF INDIAN HISTORY*

BHASKAR CHAKRABORTY

I

In recent times, the study of political change in British India has been raised to a highly sophisticated and at times somewhat intriguing level. For many historians, nationalism has ceased to be the organising element in their story ; and the nationalists qua nationalists are no longer its principal characters. They are replaced either by the crafty rural boss or his rebellious peasant opponent ; both of whom, in any case, operated within a restricted locale. Admittedly some of these men might appear as nationalists—as they often do—in the standard histories. But the more recent historical writings have suggested that different men were nationalists for different reasons. Their motivations and political perceptions had very little common basis or direction. Disjunctions in various forms—nation-province, town-village, urban leader-peasant follower—appear to have dominated Indian politics to such an extent that a national unitarian standpoint has been regarded as extremely inadequate for conceptualising political change in British India. The unitarian vision has given way to an expanding range of non-national perspectives. Studies of regional subnationalism, local factions and autonomous peasant movements emerged as competing historiographical trends within a new tradition that refuses to believe that the idea of the Indian nation as such could ever exist without incorporating different and discordant meanings at different levels.

Undoubtedly the detailed analysis of institutional politics and popular movements on a regional-local scale have shorn off much of the earlier simplicities of the subject. Historians have undertaken the demanding task of identifying the complex con-

*Written in 1983.

nexions between the socio-cultural differentiations of a plural society and the nationalist politics, between the political elite and the ordinary participants. These were complexities that had largely escaped the notice of earlier historians who had relied heavily on Imperial policies and personalities, and had written 'representative biographies' of the great leaders. Others who ventured to study the 'ideological factors' and 'the class basis' of the movement, often started with the assumption that the national movement progressively gathered strength and challenged British rule more strongly than before. Even when they looked at the regions, the purpose had been to provide vivid illustrations of the general all India trends within a manageable provincial canvas.

Necessarily these were views from the apex of the Indian political system, that apparently failed to consider the multiplicity of conflicting trends operating at the base of the country's political life. An awareness of such ground-level trends—often shaped by our contemporary experience—called for the disaggregation of the 'Nation' into its regional and local components. Over the last two decades, a series of regional and local studies have looked at the 'nation' from below ; initially from the viewpoints of the 'elite' (Cambridge School) and then from that of the people (subaltern studies). Whatever differences they show in their conclusions, arise mainly from their conflicting assessments of the principal features of political activity in the base units. While Washbrook's rural boss apparently enjoyed complete dominance over the dependent peasantry ; Pandey's peasant was capable of spontaneous resistance. But in any case, in this domination-resistance dialectics, the national factor seemed to have had much less influence than had generally been assumed.

Interestingly enough, this breaking up of the picture did not happen haphazardly and can be neatly arranged in a chronological sequence. The writing of such histories has a history of its own, the course of which has periodically raised uncomfortable questions about some crucial assumptions of the national history. One cannot afford to be chary of new questions ; for after all they keep history alive. Even then what is still needed is an overall understanding of the synthesising factors that would at least prevent 'India' from being wholly banished from the writing of Indian history.

II

An important point of departure in the historians' descent from the nation to the region was D. A. Low's *Soundings in*

Modern South Asian History (1968). In his introduction, Professor Low commended highly the study of Indian politics in its regional setting. It is only at a rather "rarefied level (perhaps the modern Indian State) that modern Indian history", as Low writes, "may be said to comprise a single all India story. At other levels marked variations exist, and if we are to proceed to understanding it further, regional studies, within the orbit of an awareness of the overall story, are now of quite vital importance."¹ The tone was evidently cautious. He did not go as far as the influential English historian Kitson Clark who claimed that "the old bland confident general statements about whole groups of men or classes or nations ought to disappear from history..."² Yet his cautious tone did not conceal his suspicion of national level generalisations. The disaggregative empiricist historiographical position which had been dominating British historical circles for sometime mingled with the comparable structuralist variant of modern Sociology and a combination of these approaches was extended to the writing of Indian history through a type of rural studies initiated by—to give a few prominent examples—Bernard Cohn and R. E. Frykenberg. Both Cohn and Frykenberg emphasised the specialities of regional developments and warned against any facile general statements about the British impact on the Indian rural society or about the adjustments from the Indian side. They anticipated the theory that distinct regions in India contain independent and unique dynamics of change, for each region structurally and historically was different from the other. Hence a general framework may be a 'convenient expedient', but it must remain under constant suspicion. Besides, they discovered the existence of dominant local groups—whose influence over their particular localities was such that without their co-operation outside agencies from revenue administrators to political parties could not function. Forces from above had to come to terms with local interests and predilections.³

This new understanding came to influence the reductionist political historians who tried to fit these findings within the framework of regional and local politics in British India.⁴ Besides this, in explaining the lack of national uniformities in Indian society, some of its inherent cultural divisions were given greater prominence than the overarching unities, which were considered as forces of very recent origin and with few cultural roots in the Indian society. Subtle traditional distinctions along caste and community lines appeared to have determined the stronger region-bound identities.

The new insights that these perspectives brought into the subject challenged some of the crucial assumptions of the national history, including the idea of the Indian nation itself. For long historians belonging to different schools of opinion had been expressing widely divergent views on the Indian National Movement. Sharp debates over its class bases, ideologies and limitations continued. Yet these divergent opinions had one point of agreement. They thought in terms of the nation as a whole and emphasised the kinds of ideas and interests that touched the whole of India. Prominent in their analysis were such factors as the more or less uniform aspirations of the educated middle classes responding to world ideological trends ; the ambitions of the nascent Indian capitalist class and later the coming together of these elitist forces and the masses under the Congress banner ; and all these forces were in their view sustained by the nationalist indictment of foreign rule. These solidarities were believed to be unfolding through a gradual process as more and more Indians belonging to different classes and groups turned opponents of British Rule. The differences among the historians centred around their conflicting emphases between class and ideology. Some emphasised the interest of the dominant classes in giving a shape to nationalism. Others laid greater stress on idealistic motivations. Conflicts within nationalism also received attention (Extremist-Moderate), but they were seen as all India trends. Despite such free play of opinions the idea of the Indian nation always occupied the centre of the stage.⁵

The doubts about the centrality of the 'National' factor in Indian politics surfaced as soon as the conceptual disaggregation process started. This began with a type of regional studies in the seventies. The more the historians delved into the particularities of the distinctive cultural regions that constituted India, distinctive regional identities differing in form and content from and often opposed to, an all pervasive national identity. were discovered. A man's sense of belonging seemed to have been shaped more by community consciousness of narrower kinds than by abstract national consciousness devoid of any deep cultural roots. In this new framework of analysis the assumption was that modern West-inspired nationalist politics in India also contained within its body several narrower traditional social conflicts arising out of such identities. These built in tensions found their way into modern politics through associations formed along caste and community lines. These developments had serious implications in the context of the competitive characteristics of institutional politics. John Broomfield and Anil Seal, in their

earlier works, tried to reconcile these many-faced region-based cultural alignments with the apparently more uniform phenomenon of the English-educated elites.⁶ The result of such accommodation between traditional forces of strong caste or community allegiances and modern politics seemed to have produced endless provincial variations within the framework of a supposedly monolithic nationalism. Broomfield had already suggested a 'theory of regional elite' and this he tested by selecting a particular region (Bengal) and a particular period (1912-26).⁷ The idea of a nationalist leadership yielded ground to the concept of 'Regional Elites' and hence a set of regional leaderships. If Bengal politics was the preserve of the disgruntled 'Bhadroluk' elite, Maharashtra was controlled by the aggressive Chitpavan Brahmins.⁸ These regions were politically more active than regions like U.P. where the extraordinary local power of the conservative rural magnates—and loyalists too—determined a lethargic political culture.⁹ What these scholars did was to use this differential elite-structure in India to explain the variations in the political life in different regions even though an influential component of the regional elites came from the Western educated intelligentsia sharing in a common educational training and professional standing. The reason why they were often behaving in different ways lay mainly in the different types of interests they had to serve or different kinds of cultural traditions to make use of. Furthermore, the situation was complicated by the fact—as the case of U.P. or even Bihar at the turn of the nineteenth century demonstrated—that there was very little uniformity in the levels of political development in different regions, because of which the dominant political issues to some extent lacked homogeneity. D. A. Low shows how such differences appeared quite boldly to Keir Hardie during his visit to India in 1907. He presented contrasting pictures of political development, a quiet U.P., a hesitant Madras, Punjab and Bengal volatile for different reasons, and Western India ridden by Gokhale—Tilak conflict.¹⁰ Regional elite conflicts did not appear to have followed a general pattern, as competition between elite groups in the different types of public institutions from education societies to local government bodies appeared to have been overlaid by 'the (traditional) rivalries between caste and caste, community and community.'¹¹ The character of such rivalries lacked uniformity, being conditioned by specific regional factors such as the demographic distribution of caste or communal groups, or the levels of education and ambitions of competing social groups. In such analyses, the varieties of political experiences in

India were highlighted, and the arguments hinged on the evidences of interpenetration of modern political forms—representation, associations etc.—and traditional conflicts emanating from distinctive regional cultural milieu.¹²

The complexities were multiplied, as a deeper probe into the regions began to reveal that the nation tended to mean completely different things in different cultural regions, as the idea often contained conflicting identities. Powerful regional cultural identities were brought into sharper focus by some American historians leading to the discovery of 'regional nationalism'. They found within the frame-work of Indian Nationalism, the existence of several competing cultural nationalisms. The latter seemed to have been more appealing than the former. Society in India was conceived as a syndrome of vertically divided groups, 'pillars' determined by cultural factors. The men placed at the head of each 'pillar' were regarded as the main operators in the Indian political arena, drawing the general support from the base of the pillar. The existence within the Indian nation of strong and organized cultural groups, it seemed to many, had resulted in a narrower kind of 'group consciousness' and linked with regional social conflicts, it was lending some specialities to regional politics. Their convergence with national politics on certain issues could not conceal the more dominant tendency running counter to the wider demands of the Indian Nation. Eugene Irschik in his study on South India showed how the traditional social conflict between the Brahmans and the Non-Brahmans had brought about Tamil separatism by the Non-Brahmans' identification of the former as the agents of an alien North Indian culture. This suggestion of the conflict of 'two nationalisms' is contained in several other studies.¹³ Some went to the extent of discovering the roots of modern radicalism in Bengal in similar regional specialities. Terrorism in Bengal was seen as originating from regional cultural roots, and the strength of contemporary leftism in Bengal is in this view a continuation of that essentially Bengali inheritance.¹⁴ Strong regional identities, according to this school of opinion, were the dominant factors operating in the process of political mobilization. In such analysis the regions received the central focus ; suggesting a pluralism of political loyalties with long term political implications of some moment, within Indian nationalism.

Therefore in the sixties as a result of the growing emphasis on 'regionalism'—not just regional variations—the nation was already retreating from the centre of the stage before the historians of the 'locality' pushed it further into the wings. Already

the emphasis on the institutional dynamics of Indian politics, in the sense of Indian participation in the representative framework, brought into prominence the element of competition among Indians i.e. the rivalries within Indian national politics as opposed to the idea of a grand unity against foreign rule. By implication the imperial factor was pushed into the background. The historians of the 'locality' inherited these two tendencies. The difference was that the regional historians' subject matter was still an aggregate of people bonded together by some cultural forces while the historians concerned with the dynamics of local politics found little influence of cultural factors like caste feelings or similar forces. Their concern was the dominant individual operating in the locality with localistic aims and forming factions. In their attempt to understand the innermost local springs of Indian politics, reducing the regions into their smallest component parts, the younger historians of the so-called Cambridge School ignored regional cultural solidarities and for them politics was a story of faction comprising a set of hard and calculated individual interests.

The shift from the 'regions' to the 'localities' was celebrated with the publication in 1973, of a highly influential collection of essays, some of which later grew into full-fledged monographs.¹⁵ Anil Seal in his introductory essay provided the framework of the new approach, revising some of his earlier opinions. The emphasis was on the need to look into the local base-units of Indian politics. The importance of the aggregative social, economic and even cultural factors in politics was doubted. Individual drives for power within the framework of institutional politics seemed to be the real determinants of political participation. Power was the be all and end all in Indian politics ; ideas were empty rhetoric. Instead of taking the assumptions of 'nationalism' or even 'regionalism' for granted, attempts were made to look into individual motivations. Their findings were that dominant individuals—dominant in the localities in their own right such as Christopher Bayly's 'Raies' of Allahabad or David Washbrook's 'Reddys' of the Andhra countryside—were organising, in response to the institutional opportunities for power, local factions out of self interest or at best localistic aims. The magnetic quality of power was drawing them to politics, for such powers could be effectively used to further self-interest, and increase their local dominance. For these purposes, the local notables propped up the publicists, journalists and other articulate sections in the society. Together, they formed factions, built on 'connexions' shaped by 'patron-client

linkages'. Such linkages cut across all barriers of caste and community. In the formation of factions there was no caste bar, since power was the major consideration. The articulate small town lawyer operating in the representative bodies had to depend on the wealthy men of local influence for fund and local support. The demands of such patron-client connexions, essentially local in character, determined political behaviour of men even outside the locality. These connexions were effectively used in electoral politics and through this process local factionalism was grafted into the body of Indian politics.¹⁶

According to this view, the most important general factor in Indian politics was the 'government impulse', rather than the nationalist impulses. 'Government impulse' in the form of constitutional concessions transformed the character of Indian politics by drawing the 'local bosses' or their agents into more important centres of power.¹⁷ In response to this government initiative towards devolution of powers from 1882 onwards, factions were transformed into broad based party organizations in order to strengthen their claims for power. Still the factional elements and the factional rivalries could not be eliminated. For the parties were formed by taking cognizance of similar sets of self interests in the locality or outside. And the shifting alliances of the local factions determined the fortunes of the political parties. In Indian politics, at all corners, local factional equations seemed to have a dominating presence.¹⁸

III

The observations of the 'Cambridge cluster' of historians are not baseless; they are slightly one-eyed. Following an English critic of Sir Lewis Namier, one can perhaps say that such 'multiple biographical' approach is more helpful in the study of stable political situations. Under conditions of instability and large scale political movements, people behave so awkwardly and irrationally that with the methods of this 'rational' historiography, it becomes difficult to comprehend their agitating mood in situations when they fret rather than calculate.¹⁹ On the other hand, even from the stand point of factional politics, the Cambridge historians offered a static view to the degree that they ignored the qualitative variations in the behaviour of factional politics at different levels. Factions struggling for spoils in the local institutions had been qualitatively different from the factional alignments in the AICC meetings. It

may be interesting to know more of how the priorities of the factional alignments operating at different levels of political activity varied, considering the constant accommodation of interests and opinions taking place in the higher levels.

But this has not been the main objection. The 'Cambridge' version has always left behind a more acute sense of dissatisfaction for its excessive preoccupation with coterie politics. Its confident assumptions about the hidden rational springs of political behaviour are always suspect at least in situations when Indian political life went through a considerable amount of turmoils, hardships and sufferings at all levels. For an alternative to this conceited view, the historian is thus instinctively drawn towards the history of large-scale agitations and various aspects of what goes by the names of popular politics or 'mass nationalism'. The two have been used normally as interchangeable terms, to describe the other face of Indian politics. Basically this 'mass nationalism' was a twentieth century phenomenon, understood as something distinct from—yet not unrelated to—the limited movement of the earlier period; as the standard nationalist interpretations suggest that during the Gandhian era the mainly urban 'intellectual nationalism' of the later nineteenth century came to be fused with the scattered popular protest movements emanating from below. If in the nineteenth century 'nationalism' in its modern political pan-Indian sense existed in the mind of the leaders, in the twentieth century it managed to penetrate the heart of the people.²⁰

It appeared that such nationalist symbiosis—the combination of the intellectual with ordinary folk—brought about more intense pressures on the Raj, forcing the latter to grant a series of constitutional concessions of much larger significance. On this interpretation the prime factor of political change in British India was the gradual acceleration of Indian pressures. And with each concession, Imperialism appeared to have been staging its gradual retreat under pressure, not willingly.²¹ Such pressures—appearing in the form of large scale agitations—were however, never uniform. They came in cycles; touching different regions unevenly. Yet the historian did not find it difficult to identify a common thread—however thin that might have appeared to some—of nationalism in this otherwise uneven story of nationalist mobilization. Such nationalization of the masses was substantial in certain regions like U.P. or Gujarat, not quite so strong in other regions, say South India. Some of the recent studies—often arguing from conflicting ideological positions—bring out clearly the extent of this mobilization,

showing how by the end of the 1920s, in some relatively lately politicized regions like U.P. or Gujarat the Congress managed to build up a chain of command linking up the local nationalist organizations with the central body.²² By the end of 1930s the chain of command began to be extended into the hitherto insulated world of princely India.²³ At times of agitations, this chain of command often resembled a parallel political authority—the Congress Raj or Prati Sarkar as the protagonists used to say—in the dispersed country side. In such situations the use of the honorific 'Gandhi-Maharaj' was no less symbolical of the existence of a parallel authority or, to put it more ambitiously, the idea of an alternative state system in the perception of rural folk.²⁴

Historians generally found in the transformation of the Congress from an elite body into a mass organization a substantial enlargement of the scope of the movement. It was far from complete ; nonetheless it was an index of the resolution, however partial, of the town-village dichotomy in the country's political life. The increasing integration between the two levels of political activity was regarded a synthesising factor in an otherwise multifaceted story of resistance to foreign rule.²⁵ Whether the Congress in the process was transformed into a peasant party is immaterial. Despite the claims of some participants, the Congress by no means emerged as a peasant party. Yet the peasant groups came to function as a crucial component in the organization, along with other classes and groups ranked above and, though rarely, also below the peasantry. That was precisely the Congress' general aim ; the peasant mobilization, involvement in states' people's movements, periodic reshuffling of the organization, and support for Indian business against foreign domination were various means to achieve that.

Historians who have worked on the earlier period have indicated that a hesitant beginning towards such integration had already been made in the later 19th century. Several studies about the early nationalist attempts to forge country wide linkages show how in places where this linkage building was relatively successful, the local political leadership had already been co-opting in their political scheme issues thrown up by a prior process of social mobilization. In this respect Bengal and U.P may be taken as two contrasting areas. While the secular politics of Aswini Datta failed to make much headway among the Namasudra peasants of Eastern Bengal, some other leaders like Malaviya knew how to make effective use of popular Hindu

cultural symbols.²⁶ John Maclane has written of the early Congress' hesitation to use these resources on account of their potential of undermining the social cohesion necessary for a united front against foreign rule.²⁷ The accommodation in some form of these forces was however unavoidable to the extent that the changing popular imperatives of both agitational and electoral politics had produced the need for a kind of mobilization that was beyond the capacity of secular constitutional high politics. Cooption of these issues or using traditional idioms, at least provided some useful points of entry into the politically undermobilized rural areas. D. A. Low points out that during the Gandhian era such mobilization was relatively successful in the hitherto submerged regions—especially the Hindu heartland of Northern India—than in the maritime presidencies with an established tradition of high politics. Low also draws our attention to the shifting political balance inside the Congress in favour of the regions with a stable rural base.²⁸ Here many of the Congress mobilizers were educated men coming from small landlord families. Earlier when politics in the major Presidency towns was vibrant with activity, politics in regions like U.P. remained dull and dominated by the loyalist landlords. But once the educated classes took over the leadership role in regions such as U.P., Bihar or Gujarat, the complexion of the political situation in these regions changed remarkably. Several studies have touched on this transformation—a rural upsurge with students and small town lawyers taking an active interest in the mobilization of the peasantry in places like Gujarat, Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.²⁹ In the absence of a firmly entrenched city based regional leadership as in the maritime presidencies, the local intelligentsia could influence the regional Congress organizations. The intimate connexions that this type of men continued to retain with the country are demonstrated by Sardar Patel's or Rajendra Prasad's political career. It is well known that in 1921 such men constituted the general staff of Gandhi's army, coming up in the Congress hierarchy with a record of organising mass movements. Undoubtedly, Gandhi's charisma was considerably aided by the extra-ordinary circumstances created by the war. Pressures on the small holders, artisans and the peasants created an agitative mentality. Judith Brown has pointed to the conjuncture of these factors in explaining 'Gandhi's rise to power'. Several other writings on the subject more or less tell the same story. But these accounts also suggest that a good deal depended on the initiatives of the Congress organizations and nationalist volun-

teers in the localities, conditioning perhaps the inter-spatial variations in the intensity of peasant mobilization.³⁰

Disagreements, however, centred around the precise motivations behind the elite's mobilization of the people. Some saw in the educated small town men an idealistic urge; some others emphasised elitist manipulation of peasant grievances simply as a measure of self-strengthening to frighten the Raj. Apparently the result was that such mobilization continued to suffer from certain intrinsic imperfections with the leadership showing a lack of serious concern for the social interests of the peasants. Although the local leadership capitalised on the grievances produced by the mounting pressures on the peasants, a widespread no-rent campaign was positively discouraged by the High Command. The standard Marxist arguments had traditionally seen such imperfections arising out of the bourgeois-landlord class bias of the leadership. While the peasants looked anxiously for firmer leadership in their struggle for freedom, the leadership was intent on defusing the tension generated by the anti-landlord content of peasant mobilization, thus going back on the promises of a just world.³¹ However imperfect, this was still mobilization on a grand scale; and whatever be the motives on either side, the two levels came together to the advantage of both. In Majid Siddiqi's opinion, the stimuli of the Congress volunteer activities, apart from creating nationalists out of the peasants, taught them the basic lessons of organization. Siddiqi maintained that peasant activism by itself, because of its diffused character, was not strong enough to confront the more organized power of the state. Congress volunteers made up for this deficiency, in the process releasing certain explosive popular forces over which they did not always have complete control. On this basis Siddiqi found in the emerging peasant politics of the 1920s, certain possibilities which remained unrealised: the embryo of alternative nationalism with its distinct motivations, idioms and styles of action.³²

Notwithstanding the appearance of such divergences, what comes out strikingly from these accounts is an impression of integration between the two levels of political activity. The processes through which this integration took place however created tensions in the united front against foreign rule. For some of the issues that the leadership often used as political resources had casteist or communal overtones. Association with—at least informally—cow protection movements had earlier helped bridge the gap between sections of the urban leadership and the popular pan-Hindu elements spread across the country.³³

The Gandhian praxis containing a fine blend of Hindu idioms with popular aspirations and modern organizational techniques, impressed the Hindu heartland of Northern India.³⁴ His sympathy for temple entry aspirations of the depressed castes influenced the latter.³⁵ Undoubtedly such skilful use of religion was a source of strength; it was a source of weakness too, as it heightened the sense of alienation among the Muslims, a sense already created in the era of extremist politics. Among the Muslims too a similar process started, changing the character of the Muslim League from an elitist affair into a movement reaching out for popular sympathies and support. In the era of limited politics, the Muslim breakaway appears to historians as a form of 'elite conflict' in a plural society; in the era of integration it increased the frequency of Hindu-Muslim riots.³⁶ On the other hand the balance in Muslim politics to some extent shifted from U.P.—the abode of a minority Muslim aristocracy—to Bengal and Punjab with a large Muslim population.³⁷ The popular cultural roots of this schism have come out clearly from a few other recent works showing among other things that even in the melting pot of factories and urban slums, religious divisions affected articulation of protests.³⁸ Yet they had little influence till they were integrated into the wider political arena through the processes of mass mobilization. Gandhi had seen the danger; but his attempt to recreate a united front on the Khilafat question failed. Paradoxically, the Khilafat, as the subsequent careers of some leading Khilafatis would show, managed to bring the Muslim elites closer to the Muslim masses as Muslims.³⁹

The speed with which the country's political life was integrated has been sought out by several other regional studies covering the princely states like Mysore, Travancore and a few others. The histories of Mysore and Travancore in the 1930s and 1940s show how in a short period of time the Congress managed to break open the insulation that the British surrounded these regions with.⁴⁰

This integrationist position has recently been attacked by Gyan Pandey in an influential essay in the *Subaltern Studies I*. The new historiographical position that Pandey represents as distinct from the standard Marxist position is evident from his stated differences with Majid Siddiqi's version of peasant politics in U.P. Pandey has called Siddiqi to order for supposedly ignoring the autonomous motion of peasant politics, their capacity of self-mobilization under independent peasant leadership over an area much larger than their immediate surroundings.

On this interpretation it seems no longer sufficient to analyse the 'imperfections' in the nationalist mobilization, for whatever the imperfections, they arose from some fundamental divergences between the two levels of political activity. They were divergences of a long term nature rooted in conflicting consciousness and aspirations, rendering the imperfections somewhat inevitable.⁴¹

There is however hardly anything strikingly new in the descriptive content of the notion of 'self-mobilization.' That the peasants had been participating in various types of protest activity, since pre-colonial times when 'organized politics' of the Congress type was a thing of the future, is well known. It is also generally accepted that under colonial rule the peasants continued to mobilize themselves against their local oppressors, frequently acting as extractive agents of the state power. Siddiqi also recounts this experience as a backdrop to his story.⁴² The new insight that a few essays in the *Subaltern Studies* brings into the subject lies in the greater importance they attach to the continuity of such independent movements and dominance of autonomous perceptions in the peasant mind despite the emergence of a pan-Indian multi-class frame work of protest against foreign rule. The peasants' concern for the removal of foreign rule was secondary to their principal aim of retaining their status, position and freedom. Following the new logical scheme it is possible to argue that the character of peasant movements in the twentieth century was not greatly different from the peasant struggles of earlier times. This is precisely where the distinctive point lies. While Siddiqi's U.P. peasantry belonged to a hierarchy within the nationalist formation; Pandey's peasants were peasants first and peasants last. Occasional convergences of their autonomous movements with the town based national movement do not conceal the more prominent and profound divergences manifest in the peasants' sense of distance from the 'outsider' leadership, their distinct languages of articulating grievances, and in the differences in the forms of political action.⁴³ Arguing from a similar premise, the communalist turn of rural politics in Eastern Bengal has been explained as a refraction of the peasant community's resistance to various 'outsider' agencies of oppression. Such resistances took on a communal character not simply because the undifferentiated peasant community was overwhelmingly Muslim while most of the landlords and money lenders were Hindus, but there was a distinct community sense on the basis of which they viewed the Hindu rent-receivers as alien.⁴⁴

IV

After all that has been written on independent peasant activism in the era of nationalist politics, the peasants can no longer be seen as a 'sack of potatoes' incapable of mobilizing themselves into a revolutionary political force. Doubtless their findings have improved our understanding of the process of political change in the localities, as factions of various shades and colour have yielded place to protest of the ordinary people—the peasants mainly in a country like India. There has been a significant attempt to study the peasants' societies on their own terms. But in their appreciation of nationalism or even communalism, they have betrayed a one-track concern with the peasants' independent consciousness. The result is a tendency to assess nationalism in terms of preoccupations which fit finely with the ideals of egalitarian reconstruction of the nation rather than the story of its creation under British rule. To look at the national movement from the position of an ideal type peasant rebel has the danger of missing out on the impact of the chemical process through which the peasants came to identify with the nationalist or communalist ideals, although such identification was juxtaposed with their own categories of articulation.

At personal, institutional and ideological levels—a string of connexions had emerged bringing the abstract 'nation' and the discrete localities closer, thus widening the geographical extent of the nation. British rule had its own share in this process. Interestingly enough more sophisticated accounts of the imperial contribution to the creation of an integrated polity are available in the works of the Cambridge historians. What they ignored was the mental world of the men who operated such connexions from the nationalist side; the intermediary levels of the nationalist leadership who straddled the two realms of organized politics and the 'relatively unorganized' world of peasant movements. They were the message carriers of nationalism, carrying the nation from the cities to the country, not without difficulty, nor completely without success. A detailed reconstruction of their history, not merely of those among them who subsequently hit the headlines, is necessary before dismissing them as 'outsiders'. After the rise of mass politics, these levels became increasingly important to the Congress high command. New aspirants for Congress leadership had to count their support, introducing a certain amount of movement at these levels. Some men—like Rajendra Prasad or Sardar Patel—moved up in the Congress hierarchy with a record of popular

politics ; new men were coming in.⁴⁵ It is doubtful, if all such men were looked upon as 'outsiders' by the village folk. Even in Bengal where provincial politics was much more city based than elsewhere in Northern India, the town-country social and political connexions were maintained through deep country links of Bengali gentry. Rajat Ray's essay in this volume delienates the links that the educated gentry retained despite the growing urbanism of values of its substantial sections. To the peasant, as impressions from literature suggest, they were Babus and as such different. But difference did not always imply distance. During his periodic visits to the village they brought new messages and information of what was happening all around the world. Apart from presenting new social ideals, the Babu related to the village folk as a knowledgeable man whose advice on important matters was often deemed valuable.⁴⁶ Admittedly the importance of such connexions can not be overemphasised in the Bengal case. But the picture may be slightly different elsewhere, especially in regions in which the local intelligentsia was relatively countrybound, and had various forms of social

and cultural affinities with the peasant population. Of course the peasants were not always influenced by them, preferring on many occasions to rely on their own wisdom. Yet such self-preference perhaps did not raise a wall between the two spheres. Lines of communication remained open and existed at many points, having their own histories. It is questionable if the simple insider-outsider dichotomy adequately explains the complex cobweb of social relations that make up a society, providing also resources of political mobilization.

Instantly, the questions of class relations and class conflicts will arise ; for it is not wholly untrue that the local intelligentsia by origin or by association or because of the interlocking elite structure had been sharing interest perceptions which prevented them from identifying fully with the social aspirations of the peasantry. The latter demanded some rearrangements in the structure of landholding and reorganization of rural credit, issues around which the peasants mobilized themselves. Towards such mobilization, the attitude of the leadership was undoubtedly ambivalent, with their interests in land functioning as a brake on the peasant movements. Yet at certain points on the course of the movement the peasants valued the higher leadership. Even in the versions of self-mobilization this syndrome appears quite clearly. How does one explain the periodic coming together of the urban leader and the peasants ? An easy way out is of course a theory of manipulation of the

peasant grievances by the 'elite' for short term political ends. Interestingly enough from a collection of the findings of extremely divergent accounts of Indian politics, a continuous story of manipulation emerges. Since the later 19th century, the local elite had been building up supralocal political connexions by using new opportunities in the form of local representative bodies. In this they were strengthened by their dependent local peasant clientele. As they felt the need for more power, they began to use the clientele for agitational purposes. But the moment they felt threatened by the radical turn of such mobilization they did all in their power to destroy the movements. This kind of an explanatory framework ultimately hinges on the peasants' innocence of the elite's machinations, particularly when one approaches the fact that the peasants, despite self-mobilization, did not wholly reject the leadership and as events taking place over several decades suggest that they were periodically placing themselves at the former's disposal. But the peasants, as the protagonists of self-mobilization and other historians of the peasant economy have rightly pointed out, were perfectly rational beings possessing a keen awareness of their interests and articulating them in their own language. Assuming that it is important to know why they should make the repeated mistake of choosing the wrong persons as their leaders, the explanation perhaps lies somewhere in that hazy zone of various levels of identifications allowing an identity of interest perceptions to develop between the leader and the follower. Or else the leadership, however inadequate, was at least felt necessary by the peasantry.

The nationalist caution in terms of the multi-class imperatives of the Congress movement does not seem altogether unreasonable, considering the primary political objective of nationalization of political power. Yet this eclectic political framework was flexible enough to accommodate interests and perspectives that in some ways defied it by posing new challenges. The nationalist organization was conditioned by the overriding concern for political integration and calculation of strength. Indeed the striking power of the national movement depended on the leadership's calculation of its own strength, its ability to command a wider public support and the relative power of the adversaries. And this calculation took place on an all-India scale with all the disadvantages of a vast and uncleanly differentiated society. For instance, the Congress allowed some violent forms in select areas during the Quit India movement. The intensity of the movement in some regions was far

greater than earlier.⁴⁷ During the Civil Disobedience movement the Congress in U.P. allowed selective use of no rent campaign in the large estates of the loyalist landlords while in Bihar because of a high level of small landlord participation in the movement, this was not unnaturally discouraged.⁴⁸ The Congress involvement in the Praja Mandal movements in the princely states is another noteworthy example. From the mid 1930s the Congress leadership began to interfere in the princely states from a position of relative strength. The princes were written off as possible allies as soon as they emerged as threats to integration.⁴⁹

Integration itself was valuable when divide-and-rule was an integral part of the Imperial plan. It is with these primary objectives that the Congress mobilized the masses. Economic and social questions, such as zamindari oppression, land reforms and untouchability, came only as foils to the unifying political objective. Although disagreements on the land question often led to severe strains inside the Congress, there was however a fair amount of agreement about the primary need of political independence.⁵⁰ Under conditions of foreign rule, such definition of purpose was natural enough and it was perfectly rational for Gandhi to associate the evils of different forms of oppression with foreign rule. Gandhi time and again reprimanded the empire for turning zamindari into an oppressive institution; and envisaged the recreation of a harmonious corporate rural society. Whatever be the actual import of such thinking, it nonetheless provided a common point on which protests from various levels could converge. It will be interesting to know more of how messages of this kind were relayed downwards by the Congress volunteers and how the peasants responded to them, before freezing the peasant mind in a structure of peasant communitarianism. In explaining the relative absence of the peasants' independent actions in Bihar in the early 1930s, Sumit Sarkar has pointed to the influence of the idea of multi-class unity. Even when nationalism came mainly as a promise to solve the peasants' daily needs, the need for an alternative political system must have influenced the peasant mind. The anti-Congress trends in peasant politics of Bihar, after the Congress ministry was formed in 1937, support this hypothesis.⁵¹ Once the Congress was in power, the internal contradictions within nationalism began to appear, as substantial sections of the peasantry broke away from the main body of the Congress either strengthening their own organisations or switching their loyalties to the communists. These trends were reinforced

after independence. In the same manner, the urban politicians, too, drifted apart. Factions grew into parties. Thus the broad unities created by foreign rule were inoperative in a changed historical context. The position before 1947 was somewhat different. Without ever denying the existence of acute social conflicts it is logically possible to visualise their temporary resolutions. Conceding that 'freedom' meant different promises to different groups, the common target still was British rule.

The British were the enemy. But it does not however mean that every Indian was always motivated by this perception. There is a certain amount of truth in the point that the Imperial rulers were able to drive wedges in the nationalist camp by playing with competing class, community and group interests. The behaviour of different interest groups fluctuated considerably, as both the Raj and the Congress competed for their support. After the war, for both the competing powers, the business groups turned out to be a very exacting ally.⁵² Although with the peasantry the Congress had been more successful, the management of its rural base was however complicated by the depressed classes' movement, particularly after the British came to accept the depressed castes as a new category of interest for the purposes of representation in the second Round Table Conference. During the period, the relatively loyalist Mahar movement of B. R. Ambedkar started making an impact among the backward castes and the Muslim League syndrome was very much in the rulers' mind when they responded by offering a separate electorate. It was Gandhi's Harijan campaign that saved the situation for the Congress by preventing the movement from growing into another Muslim League.⁵³ But the movement nonetheless made it clear that substantial sections of the rural population among the untouchables and other depressed castes needed as much attention as the caste peasantry. Such deficiencies in mobilization had already created difficulties. At the height of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, the Namasudra peasantry led by a tiny educated elite remained loyalists. Their loyalism persisted through the 1920s and 30s.⁵⁴ During the Civil Disobedience movement at Kheda, the British played off the depressed Baraiya caste against the nationalist Patidars by offering land vacated by the non-cooperators.⁵⁵ Similar developments took place in the completely different context of Mewar during the Bijolia Satyagraha of 1922.⁵⁶

The problems of this nature were built into the intricately differentiated society creating enormous difficulties for the

nationalist mobilizers. Apart from this, in different areas and at different levels the material and psychological roots of political activity were different. Issues ranged from the right of temple entry to the right of distillation, from industrial protection to professional parity between the British and the Indians. One of the purposes of this volume is to unveil these many faces of protest. The task of the nationalist mobilizer, however, was to stitch this maze of protests into a manageable combative force. Periodic resurgence of peasant movements, unorganized yet important for their radical potentialities is one thing, country-wide mass mobilization is another. The difficulties in this plastic surgery were many, as the vast society with its complex forms of differentiations was unevenly prepared for a head on collision with the alien state power.

A view from below, by its very nature restricted to a particular locale, would provide little in the way of understanding the difficulties faced by the much maligned "elite" of Indian politics. It is important to know how the Congress organisations at different levels perceived and deliberated on the organisational problems posed by uneven and irregular mobilization. If a historian started with an assumption that protest and conflicts were ever present, he is likely to read great revolutionary potentialities into innocuous events, swiftly coming to the judgement that the 'people' were always pining for an explosion that the leadership tended to avoid out of class bias.

But then the leadership was not a single block of stone. There were radical elements whose political calculations behind accepting a moderate course need serious consideration.⁵⁷ Was their radicalism entirely spurious, or the exercise of caution an exigency because of the wide inter-spatial variations in the nature of mass-mobilization, whatever be the cause? It is well known that even the large-scale agitations did not have a uniform impact. Take for example, the non-cooperation movement. While Northern India was set ablaze, Maharashtra was relatively quiet. Gujarat which was one of the main areas of the Gandhian movement in 1920-21 and 1930-32 did not respond in the same manner to the Quit India movement. The 42 movement reached unprecedented heights in certain pockets in Bengal, Bihar, Eastern U.P. and Maharashtra, but it did not spread over wide areas and sustain for a long time.⁵⁸ Such irregularities pervaded the history of the 20th century Indian mass movements. How did they react on the mind of the leadership including its radical section? Did it make the radical Congress-

left uncertain about throwing up an alternative strategy of mobilization ?

But, given such variations, was it possible for the peasants themselves to organize comparable movements on their own initiative and to sustain it over a long period ? The history of the Moplah uprisings showing the cyclical recurrence of a typical antonomous stream of protest does not seem to suggest any such possibilities.⁵⁹ As a result in our search for the rebellious peasants we still mainly concentrate on periods around 1920-21, 1930-32, 1942—when the dividing line between the organized and the unorganised became somewhat blurred.

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ground of Indian Nationalism (Bombay, 1966) had emphasised the connexion between nationalism and the emergence of a modern class structure in India dominated by professions, the gentry and later by organized indigenous business. Desai emphasised the "phenomenon of separate class movements *on a national scale* and a united national movement for political freedom, economic advance and cultural progress" (p. 219). The limitations of the movement, on their view, as is well known, arose from the organized influence of the propertied classes on the Congress. The story of the emergence and growth of the Congress as the focus of nationalist loyalties is available in S. R. Mehrotra, *The Emergence of the Indian National Congress* (Delhi, 1971), P. C. Ghosh, *The Development of the Indian National Congress* (Calcutta, 1960) and the party's transformation into a mass party between 1918 and 1923 is shown with statistical information by Gopal Krishna, "The Development of the Congress as a mass organization" *Journal of Asian Studies* (1966). Analysis of the conflicts within the early Congress in class terms (Moderate-bourgeoisie versus Extremist-petty bourgeoisie) came from a collection of essays edited by Reisner and Goldberg, namely *Tilak and the Struggle for Indian Freedom* (New Delhi, 1966). In spite of the varying emphases in their writings they were still pitched on an all-India scale.

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 28. D. A. Low (ed.) *Soundings*, pp. 12-17.

29. Peter Reeves "Politics of Order"; JAS, Vol. 25, 1966, pp. 262-264; G. McDonald, "Unity on Trial: Congress in Bihar, 1929-39" in Low (ed.) *Congress and the Raj*, pp. 292-294; David Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat* (1981), pp. 75-79. W. F. Crawley who anticipated much of the recent writings on independent peasant mobilization in "Kisan Sabhas and Agrarian Revolt in the U. P. 1920-21", MAS, Vol. V, 1971, also acknowledges the presence of middle class leadership in the U. P. Kisan Sabha movement from the beginning (p. 96), although later, as Crawley shows, the Kisan Sabha movement came to acquire its radical independent leadership.
30. Judith Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power* (Cambridge, 1974) Ch. 3. For Sardar Patel's early career and his deep involvement in local politics see D. Hardiman. *op. cit.* pp. 76-77, 106, 168-69. See also J. Pouchepedass "Local Leaders and the Intelligentsia in the Champaran Satyagraha: A study in peasant mobilization" in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 1974, pp. 75-79; and the regional studies of Rowlatt Satyagraha in Ravinder Kumar (ed.) *Essays in Gandhian Politics*, (Oxford 1971). Of special importance in this connection, is the essay by H. F. Owen, "Organizing For the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919," in *ibid.*
31. The traditional Marxist argument on these imperfections is available in R. P. Dutt, *India Today* (Second Indian edition, Manisha, 1970). For a more refined version of 'imperfect mobilization' see Gyanendra Pandey *The Ascendancy*, pp. 203-218.
32. Majid Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in North India* (New Delhi, 1978), pp. IX-XIV, 216-219.
33. John McLane, *op. cit.* pp. 295-308; C. A. Bayly, *op. cit.* pp. 217-225, 272-273; Francis Robinson, *op. cit.* pp. 115-117.
34. A. L. Basham, "Traditional Influences on the Thought of Mahatma Gandhi" in R. Kumar (ed.) *Essays on Gandhian Politics*; also Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence* (Princeton, 1958), Ch. 4.
35. Robin Jeffrey, "Travancore, Status, class and the growth of Radical politics" in Jeffrey (ed.) *People, Princes and Paramount Power*, pp. 150-158. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (Delhi, 1983) pp. 317-318.
36. The elitist roots of Muslim separatism have been traced by Anil Seal, John Broomfield and Francis Robinson in their books already cited. Robinson's work acquires particular importance in view of the leadership role the U.P. *ashraf* played in the early stages of separatist politics. For an exhaustive treatment of the populist sources of separatism in Bengal see Rafiuddin Ahmad, *The Bengal Muslims: Quest for Identity 1871-1906* (Delhi, 1980). See also John Broomfield, "Forgotten Majority" in D. A. Low (ed.) *Soundings*, pp. 210-213, for the rise of a new kind of more active and popular leadership among the Muslim Community in Bengal i.e. Fazlul Huq and Company

whose ability to mobilize the masses was far greater than the aristocrats of the Muslim League.

37. Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India* (Delhi, 1979) pp. 5-6; David Page, *Prelude to Partition*, chap. 3.
38. Rafiuddin Ahmad, *Ibid.* ch. 6. Also Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal Jute Mill hands in the 1890's" Occasional paper, CSSSC, Calcutta.
39. Mushirul Hasan, *op. cit.* ch. 6; D. Page *op. cit.* pp. 94-106, show how a substantial section of the leading khilafatists became communalist mobilizers once khilafat as a movement disintegrated.
40. For Mysore see James Manor, *op. cit.* ch. 6. Also Robin Jeffrey's works already cited for the spread of the Congress in Travancore.
41. Gyanendra Pandey, "Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism" in R. Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies*, I. (New Delhi, 1982) pp. 189-191.
42. M. H. Siddiqi, *op. cit.* ch. 3.
43. G. Pandey, *op. cit.* pp. 166-185.
44. Partha Chatterjee, "Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-1935" in Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies I*, pp. 10-11. Here Partha Chatterjee regards the "notion of community asthe live force" which helped the peasants to distinguish between 'outsiders' and insiders to the community. Mobilization along communal lines through the 'itinerant maulavis', on this view, cannot be seen in isolation from the pre-existence of a community sense among the Muslim peasants of Eastern Bengal. By implication, the community, as in the writings on sub-nationalism, remains the prime mover of Indian politics, although its precise connotations are different in view of its class content. Pandey's essay without being categorical on this point, attaches the same degree of importance to autonomous political mobilization within the peasant community independently of 'outside leadership', a term he uses to characterise the relationship between the Awadh peasants and the nationalist leadership.
45. S. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru* (Bombay, 1976), pp. 48-53; Sumit Sarkar *op. cit.* p. 222.
46. A reading of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Palli Samaj* (1916) and Tara Shankar Banerjee's *Dhatri Devata* (1939) leave us with the impression of idealistic educated young men of gentry background maintaining close relations with the local peasant population and at times seeking to mobilize them against members of their own class. Can such people—however few in number—be classified as outsiders? On the other hand, Nirad C. Chaudhuri's description of his mother's village shows how local high caste gentry families kept intimate contacts with the low caste peasant families especially through their women. A contrast

however may be drawn with his father's village in which the sense of distance between the Muslim peasantry and the local gentry was real. This contrast at least shows that social relations in rural communities had complex regional features. *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (Jaico edition, 1966), pp. 48-94. For the country links of the educated gentry see also Broomfield, *Elite Conflict*...., p. 11. Elsewhere in India where small landholders had caste and kinship ties with the local peasantry, social links between these two groups should be far more intimate.

47. Francis Hutchins, *India's Revolution* (Harvard, 1973), pp. 217-283; Sumit Sarkar, *op.cit.* pp. 394-404. For detailed case studies of Eastern U.P., Bihar, Midnapore and Satara, some of the 'storm centres' of the movement, see Max Harcourt's essay in Low (ed.) *Congress and the Raj* and the unpublished seminar papers of Hitesranjan, Sanyal and Gail Omvedt, already cited.
48. Sumit Sarkar, *op.cit.* pp. 304-307; Pandey, *Ascendancy*.
49. R. Jeffrey, (ed.) *People, Princes and Paramount Power*, pp. 306 ff.
50. Sumit Sarkar *op.cit.* pp. 341, 365-366. W. Hauser, "Indian National Congress and the Land Policy in the Twentieth Century" *IESHR*, Vol. 1, 1963, p. 58. Also R. P. Haithcox, M. N. Roy and Comintern Policy: *Communism and Nationalism in India* (Princeton, 1971), pp. 247-250.
51. G. McDonald, "Unity on Trial" in D. A. Low (ed.) *Congress and the Raj*, pp. 309-311, Sumit Sarkar, *op.cit.* p. 304.
52. A. D. D. Gordon, *Businessmen and Politics in Bombay, 1918-1933* (New Delhi, 1978), *passim*.
53. Sumit Sarkar, *op.cit.* pp. 328-330.
54. See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's article in this volume.
55. D. Hardiman, "The crisis of the lesser patidars" in D. A. Low (ed.) *Congress and the Raj*, pp. 65-66, 68-69.
56. R. K. Ray, "Mewar: The Breakdown of the Princely Order" in Robin Jeffrey (ed.) *People, Princes*...., pp. 231-232.
57. For the vacillation of Jawaharlal Nehru and his other socialist friends, see S. Gopal *Nehru vol. 1*, pp. 205-215.
58. Sumit Sarkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 221-224, 399-404.
59. Conrad Wood, "The Story of a Peasant Revolt", in Dewey and Hopkins (ed.) *Imperial Impact* (London, 1978).

